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# ARE BEST PRACTICES IN LITERACY CULTURALLY RELEVANT? AN INVESTIGATION INTO WHAT PRIMARY LITERACY TEACHERS DO TO TEACH LITERACY SKILLS TO MINORITY STUDENTS

by

Tammie L. Pittsley

(Under the Direction of Michael Moore)

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine if average primary (K-3) teachers were implementing best practices in literacy with culturally relevant teaching in their classroom practice. The cooperating district is located in southeastern Georgia and is a majority minority district. The school district personnel predominantly consists of White female teachers; however, the student population has become increasingly diverse. As a result, the need to teach literacy skills while incorporating the tenets of culturally relevant teaching is increasingly important. The study consisted of an online survey using the platform *Survey Monkey* and two focus group interviews. The survey was open to all 32 elementary and K-8 schools in the cooperating district, but only 11 principals agreed to permit their teachers participate. From a pool of approximately 250 teachers, 49 respondents completed the survey. The survey was also used to solicit participation in the focus group interviews. There were only six focus group participants, and two groups were held to accommodate everyone's schedule. This study combined inductive coding and the principles of grounded theory to conduct a thematic analysis. From data analysis, six themes emerged that showed. Among the findings was the fact that most teachers adhere to many aspects of the best practices movement. Data analysis also revealed that half of the primary

teachers in the cooperating district did not know enough about culturally relevant teaching to implement it in the classroom, with or without reconciling it to best practices.

INDEX WORDS: Culturally relevant teaching, Best practices in literacy, Literacy instruction, Reading, Writing, Minority students

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by

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M.Ed. Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2003

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

Fall 2013

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Overview and Purpose**

“Eighty-three percent of elementary school teachers in America are White and female. The future of children of color lies in the hands of White female teachers” (Kunjufu, 2008, p. 2). This fact should encourage us as teachers to ask the question, what are we doing to make that future a bright one? In other words, how are we teaching these children of color so that their potential is fulfilled and they become an asset to their community and society? More specifically to this research, what are primary grade teachers, those that teach in kindergarten through third grade, doing to ensure that the foundation of strong literacy skills is being built into the lives and minds of these children of color that populate our classrooms? Mastering literacy skills is a crucial aspect of primary education, as teachers endeavor to teach children to learn to read. This is in direct contrast to the upper grades where children need existing strong literacy skills to read to learn (Chall, 1983). Learning to read is a challenge for many students, and involves mastering many discrete skills and learning to focus on the overarching skill of reading for meaning, or reading comprehension. However, instead of teaching reading for meaning, much of reading education has become mechanistic, focusing on the separate parts of the reading process, instead of the overall goal.

Since the publication of the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000, reading instruction in the primary grades has focused on discrete skills, or individual parts of the reading process, almost to the exclusion of the meaning of literacy. That emphasis has resulted in an environment in elementary schools across the country where multiple mandates are handed down by state and district officials, assuming that adhering to the NRP’s five pillars of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, would result in an increase in literacy rates

across the board. Many states, including Georgia, have recognized that leaving writing off this list of skills was shortsighted and have attempted to remedy this oversight by instituting writing assessments in addition to reading assessments. This recognition of one of the weaknesses of the NRP, has not resulted in a repudiation of the NRP, but has added another layer to the testing bureaucracy. The milieu of mandates has continued to grow in the decade since the NRP, buttressed by the best practices movement. It is clear that attempts are being made to improve literacy rates for all children, including children of color, but what is unclear is if this approach has had a positive impact on literacy skills of minority students. One can look at national tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP, 2013), or state tests such as the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (Georgia DOE, 2011), or CRCT as it is commonly called, to determine if literacy rates are improving since the publication of the NRP. These tests are commonly disaggregated by race, so that makes it easier to determine if any improvements are consistent across races. Regardless of what the tests reveal, the NRP remains one of the most important influences of reading instruction.

The NRP may be the single largest influencer of reading instruction today, although the five pillars (Allington, 2005) of the NRP are buttressed by the best practices movement (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) by including some overlooked pieces to the literacy puzzle. This fact can be seen in the table of contents of books such as *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) that focus on the five areas of the NRP, and then expand upon them to include some areas not mentioned in the NRP. Some of the areas that the NRP neglected to include, but which are included in the best practices movement include self-selected reading, writing, digital literacies, and motivation. Despite the improvement on the NRP that the best

practices movement has made, the question remains as to whether or not this movement is effective in teaching literacy skills to minority students. The key ideas of the best practices movement will be looked at later and discussed in relation to culturally relevant teaching.

The purpose of this study was to determine what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and if these practices reflect best practices in literacy. Also investigated was whether or not the practice of culturally relevant teaching was being implemented by teachers. This information was gleaned from two sources: an open-ended questionnaire that was sent to all the elementary schools in the participating district and focus group interviews with teachers who respond to the survey. Principals at each elementary or K-8 school received an email to forward to their primary grades staff with a link to the online survey, and eleven of thirty-two principals responded positively. From this pool of eleven schools, 49 surveys were completed. Only six teachers responded positively about participating in focus group interviews. The results of these two sources of data were analyzed (see results section) with reference to determining if best practices and culturally relevant teaching were either or both occurring in classrooms in the cooperating district.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical perspective for this study was culturally relevant teaching. Although various other terms have been used for the same ideas including culturally “sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive, the ideas...are virtually identical” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Culturally relevant teaching is my preferred term. Ladson-Billings (2009) defined culturally relevant teaching as a way of teaching that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically, by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). This was an appropriate theoretical lens through which



to view literacy practices in primary grades because of the changing demographics of American public school students. Two decades ago, white students comprised 68% of the enrollment in public K-12 schools. By 2009, this percentage had dropped to 55%, and is expected to continue to drop. Conversely the enrollment of Hispanic students doubled from 11% to 22% in the same period of time, while that of other students, which includes Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and multiracial students, also doubled from 4% to 8%. Enrollment of Black students remained relatively stable at 17% of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics [NCESa], 2011). Despite the increasing percentage of students who are of non-White races, the percentage of teachers who are White is remaining fairly steady at 83% (NCESb, 2011). Therefore, culturally relevant teaching becomes even more important as the disparity between teachers and their students continues to grow.

In addition to the changing demographics of our public schools, there are persistent problems of achievement that need to be targeted, especially for minority students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress tests fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders in reading achievement every four years. The assessment scores are divided into three major classifications: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Students scoring below Basic are reading below grade level and are likely incapable of performing at grade level on a variety of reading-related tasks. The most recent assessment (2011) showed that, at fourth grade, 22% of White students achieved below the Basic level, while 51% of African Americans students, 49% of Hispanic and 53% of Native American students, achieved below Basic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011a). Asian and Pacific Islander students were comparable to White students in that only 20% scored below Basic. The Georgia state results were not significantly different from the national result. These showed that 22% of Whites, 49% of Blacks, and 40% of Hispanics did not meet the

Basic level in reading. There was not a large enough population of Native Americans to measure with validity in the state of Georgia (NCES, 2011a). While not downplaying the importance of bringing up the scores for Whites and Asians, this report clearly indicates a crisis for the significant numbers of minority students and underscores the need for culturally relevant teaching.

In addition to the increasing numbers of minority students in our public schools, and the overwhelming disparity between Whites and minority students in terms of reading achievement, another reason to emphasize culturally relevant teaching is the persistent problem of high school graduation rates. While this may seem like a strange area to look at when considering primary grades education, the fact is that many students who do not graduate from high school do so because of an inability to read on grade level. Building a strong foundation of literacy skills in the kindergarten to third grade years could help to alleviate this problem (Azzam, 2007).

Nationally, only 75% of all high school freshmen graduate from high school in four years (NCES, 2011). While this dismal statistic reflects only those students who graduate on time, another statistic indicates the drop-out rate. The dropout rate is determined by polling 16 – 24 years-olds to determine how many do not have a high school diploma, a GED certificate, or are not enrolled in any educational institution. This statistic excludes persons in the military or who are incarcerated. The fact that this figure excludes a significant portion of the young population, makes it a less reliable report than the overall graduation rate, which is not available by race.

Nonetheless, important information can be garnered from these statistics. The dropout rate declined from 14% in 1980 to 8% in 2009, a significant drop. Unfortunately, the drop was not equivalent across all races. The White dropout rate dropped from 9% to 5%, while the rate for Asian students remained stable at 4%. The Black rate decreased from 12% to 9%, while the

Hispanic rate decreased from 30% to 18%. The significantly higher rate for Hispanic persons can be attributed in large part to the percentage of this population that was born outside of the country. When contrasted with Hispanic students born in the country the dropout rate is 32% (for foreigners) compared to 10% for native born Hispanics. This is important, because there is no way to know how many of those foreign-born young people participated in the educational system in the United States (NCES, 2011). Considering the changing face of the American public school, culturally relevant teaching becomes an important method for reaching disaffected students, which are largely those of Black, Hispanic, and Native American races.

### **Assumptions**

As with any study, some assumptions about the basics of the subject being studied are unavoidable. The assumptions of this study include the following: (1) Primary teachers in the district being studied had informed opinions on the questions presented; (2) The questions asked in the survey and focus group interviews elicited information that related to the topic being studied; (3) Teachers were forthright and honest in their responses to the questions in the online survey; (4) Participants did not feel pressured in the focus group interviews to conform to others' opinions, but felt free to share their own honestly; and (5) The responses received in both the survey and interviews were reflective of the beliefs and practices of most primary teachers in the district being studied. The questions asked and the data analysis done was based on these assumptions holding true.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because there is a wealth of information about what best practices in literacy are (Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011; Pressley, et al., 2001), but there are few studies showing if those best practices are effective in teaching literacy skills to

minority students. One study that investigated the success of best practices, and disaggregated the results by race, showed that African American students much more frequently than Caucasian students failed to succeed with best practices alone (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). The current study attempted to determine to what extent literacy practices that reflect both best practices and culturally relevant teaching are being implemented in classrooms in one southeastern Georgia school district. Teachers, administrators, and district personnel may benefit from this study by learning whether best practices and culturally relevant teaching are occurring in their schools, or whether these areas may need the attention of professional development, professional learning communities, mentoring, or some other form of teaching. Researchers may benefit from the results of this study by discovering areas that may benefit from further research. Specific areas of future research may include (1) determining how culturally relevant teaching is being implemented in classrooms in this era of mandates, high-stakes testing, and best practices, and (2) determining if the best practices movement is a hindrance or help in teaching literacy skills to minority students, particularly in the primary grades.

### **Problem Statement**

The five pillars of the National Reading Panel, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, have dominated primary reading instruction for several years (NRP, 2000). These five practices have been supplemented since the publication of the NRP by the best practices movement (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). These two sources of information together provide much direction for primary teachers of reading to use in building literacy skills that will be needed as students progress to the upper elementary, middle, and high school years. Additionally, the culturally relevant pedagogy movement has provided guidance for all teachers on using methods and strategies that meet the needs of their minority students (Gay, 2000;

Ladson-Billings, 1992; 2009). The International Reading Association (2010a), in support of culturally responsive teaching, has developed standards for teaching diverse students that emphasize the need for teachers to step outside themselves and their own limited experiences in utilizing different methods and strategies for literacy learning for minority students. These facts, taken together, provide primary teachers with a wealth of guidance regarding how to teach literacy skills to minority students.

Unfortunately, the literacy learning gap remains, as evidenced by the historic trends of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2013). This trend, up to and including the most recent data, shows a disturbing 20% - 30% literacy gap between White and Asian elementary readers and their minority (Black, Hispanic, and Native American) peers. Although this gap narrowed slightly in the most recent national assessment (2008), the difference was not statistically significant. This data highlights the need for literacy instruction in the primary grades to reflect both best practices and culturally relevant teaching. Therefore teachers are encouraged to adhere to both best practices and culturally relevant pedagogy in their primary literacy teaching.

Thus, this study was designed to elicit from teachers in one southeastern Georgia district what literacy practices they engaged in with their primary students, with the intention of determining if best practices and/or culturally relevant teaching was occurring. This information could then be used to design and implement targeted professional development in the district under study.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher was interested in determining if the best practices mandates in literacy for the primary grades are being helpful in teaching literacy skills to minority students. Thus, the

research question for this study is *What literacy strategies, methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance?*

There are two sub-questions that need to be addressed to help determine the answer to this question: (1) *Do teachers understand the idea of culturally relevant teaching?* And (2) *Do teachers adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement?* These three questions guided the collection of data, the analysis of data, and the reporting of results.

### **Terminology**

To answer these questions, three key terms must be defined: best practices, literacy, and culturally relevant teaching. It is a difficult proposition to define both best practices and literacy, as both are highly fluid terms that are defined by various people in various ways. Nonetheless, a working definition will be determined from drawing from what others have to say. Culturally relevant teaching will also be defined, drawing on literature that addresses that topic. After these three major terms are defined, other terms used in the study will be defined briefly.

**Best practices.** We turn first to ‘best practices,’ a term that can be highly inflammatory as it implies that other practices, and perhaps practices dear to the hearts of some, are not best practices. It can be a difficult task to separate out some practices for the status, while leaving others out, for there is a wealth of information about literacy practices. As Duke (2011) states:

To say that something is *the* or *a* ‘best’ practice is a weighty claim in any domain, but certainly in a domain such as literacy instruction, in which such a wide variety of practices are available and in which so much research and professional experience have been accumulated. (p. xvii)

The term best practices is used to indicate that the particular practice under discussion is a better way of teaching than other methods or strategies that may have been around longer and used more frequently. Simply stated it is the best way, according to research, of doing something particular.

There are no shortages of possible definitions for best practices. But choosing, or creating, one that fits well with the task of this research project – to judge if the best practices determined in literacy research are helpful in teaching literacy skills to minority students – is a task that must be accomplished before proceeding further. Duke simply states it is the “best, most effective way to do something” (2011, p. xvii), while the Florida Department of Education defines it in a more wordy fashion as “strategies, activities or approaches that have been shown through research and evaluation to be effective and/or efficient” (FDOE, 2005). The use of “and/or” in this definition may leave the reader wondering if a strategy, activity, or approach that is efficient but not effective is best practices. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde define the term as “serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching” (2005, p. vi), leaving the reader to determine for him/herself what exactly ‘state-of-the-art’ teaching is. Meanwhile, Gambrell, Malloy and Mazzoni say it is “an instructional practice with a record of success that is both trustworthy and valid” (2011, p.17). This is a succinct and clear definition that falls short of what is needed because it does not focus on literacy. Since none of these definitions reflect exactly the nature of this research project, the researcher will draw on the work of Pressley and colleagues (Pressley, et.al., 2001) in defining best practices, for this project, as *what effective teachers of literacy do in the classroom to promote literacy achievement for all students*. Although this may appear to have no relation to the primary purpose of this study – determining if culturally relevant teaching is being implemented in the teaching of literacy skills – the

statement specifically includes “all” children. Thus, embedded in this definition is the concept of culturally relevant teaching for without that aspect being worked out in the classroom, literacy learning for *all* students would not be increasing (Gay, 2000).

**Literacy.** Second, ‘literacy’ must be defined. The International Reading Association defines literacy as, “The ability to read, write, speak, listen, view, visually represent, and think in order to communicate and contribute to society” (IRA, 2010b). This definition leaves room for various literacies, including non-print literacies. A more historic definition of literacy is found in *The Literacy Dictionary* (1995) which defines literacy as the basic ability to read and write and to be engaged in thinking about reading and writing throughout the day. However, this basic and historical definition of “able to read and write” is not up to the challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy, which has grown as technology has grown (McKenna, Labbo, Conradi, & Baxter, 2011; Roswell & Lapp, 2011). The more fluid definition of making meaning from print is still not sufficient to handle the demands of the new literacies of blogs, wikis, texting, and podcasting, among others. Indeed, even finding a definition of literacy is difficult, as the concept itself is in a constant state of change (Pressley, Billman, Perry, Reffitt, & Reynolds, 2007). Roswell and Lapp (2011) state that, “literacy varies across contexts and people involved in literacy activities...[it] is inseparable from practices and the effects of these practices.” This, while not a definition of literacy, includes the notion that literacy involves a person, it is not just a ‘thing’ out there to be captured. That is, in the context of best practices of literacy, teachers must always keep in mind that the *students* are the focus, not the literacy practices being taught. This fact brings to mind the importance of focusing on the students’ needs and individual identities, as in CRT, while teaching literacy skills, and not to focus just on the acquisition of skills.



One way to define literacy is to conceive it as a list of behaviors a literate person should be able to engage in effectively. Medwell, Wray, Poulson, and Fox (1998) in their attempt to define literacy stated that literate children should be able to

read and write with confidence, fluency and understanding; be interested in books, read with enjoyment and evaluate and justify their preferences; know and understand a range of genres in fiction and poetry, and understand and be familiar with some of the ways that narratives are structured through basic literary ideas of setting, character and plot; understand and be able to use a range of non-fiction texts; be able to orchestrate a full range of reading cues (phonic, graphic, syntactic, contextual) to monitor and self-correct their own reading; plan, draft, revise, and edit their own writing; have an interest in words and word meanings, and a growing vocabulary; understand the sound and spelling system and use this to read and spell accurately; [and] have fluent and legible handwriting. (§1.2)

Again, there is no mention of digital literacies, due in large part, no doubt, to the age of the article. Although this is a long list, it is based on the belief by the researchers that literacy is measured best by what children can do in real life, instead of how they perform on tests of discreet skills. The National Council of Teachers of English, in a policy brief about adolescent literacy, defined literacy as encompassing reading and writing, but not being limited to those two skill areas (NCTE, 2007). Furthermore, the definition specifically included both digital and non-digital multimedia, as well as Internet related media. This definition comes closest to covering all aspects of literacy to this point in time. No doubt as technology continues to develop, so will the definition of literacy.

Considering all of these sources of information, and possible definitions of literacy, then I have decided on the following as the definition for this research: *Literacy encompasses, but is*

*not limited to, reading and writing across non-digital and digital formats. Literacy includes the idea of readers making meaning from various forms of text including all types of non-digital media, digital media, and print media.* Using a definition this broad leaves room for teachers to name such instructional practices as using a *Reading Between the Lions* video, a PowerPoint presentation, an electronic book, or a literacy website in their teaching and have these items counted as literacy-oriented practices.

**Culturally relevant teaching.** Culturally relevant teaching is one of several terms that refer to the classroom practices that make it possible for minority students to be engaged in the classroom, and likely that they will succeed. As Gay (2000) stated, "...culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these in turn, affect how we teach and learn" (p. 9). Teachers who are not aware of, or do not take into consideration the cultures of their students while teaching, are dooming those students to a less than successful education. When stated in such stark language, many teachers would likely take exception, but we must remember that it is not the teacher's fault that the importance of culture is overlooked, but a lack of education that is to blame (Gay, 2000). Most teachers sincerely want their students to achieve to their highest potential, and work hard to make sure they do. Implementing culturally relevant teaching is not a matter of working harder, but of working smarter.

So what exactly is culturally relevant teaching? Although this topic will be expanded on later, we will look briefly here at two complementary definitions. Gay (2000) states that culturally responsive teaching (her term) is "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 29). Ladson-Billings (2009) similarly defines culturally relevant teaching (her term) as "a pedagogy that empowers students

intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Furthermore, she states that “culturally relevant teaching methods...[teach] to the highest standards and not to the lowest common denominator” (p. 134). Entire books have been written explaining what this looks like in the classroom (e.g. Esquith, 2003; 2007; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992; 2009; Paley, 1979/2000), and it will be explained in more detail later. For now, we will combine the two and state that *culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes, make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for minority students, and that teaches to the highest standards*. This will be the definition in mind when culturally relevant teaching is referenced in this paper.

**Reading First.** The Reading First program, written into law with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), was the federal government’s attempt to increase early literacy skills in students from kindergarten through third grade through curricular reform, mandated assessments, professional development, and literacy coaching.

**Achievement Gap.** The achievement gap is the difference in learning by privileged groups, mostly white middle and upper class students, from their non-privileged peers, such as racial minorities and students with a depressed socio-economic status. This gap has remained largely unchanged for decades, since the data began to be tracked by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

## **Summary**

The overarching focus for this study was to investigate if primary teachers in one southeastern Georgia district teach literacy skills to their students using methods, strategies, and

materials that reflect best practices in literacy and/or culturally relevant teaching. The researcher approached this question by utilizing two sources of data: an online survey consisting of open-ended questions and focus group interviews. The need for this research is evident by the racial gap in literacy skills revealed by both the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013) and results from the most recent CRCT administration (Georgia DOE, 2011). Best practices and culturally relevant pedagogy may help to close this gap if implemented in the early elementary classroom. However, not much is known about whether this is occurring.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Chapter 2 presents the literature review, with a focus on culturally relevant teaching, the National Reading Panel, and best practices in literacy. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used, including study design, participants, and data collection. Chapter 4 discusses the results of the survey and interviews, while Chapter 5 presents the summary, findings, implications, and recommendations.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and if these practices reflect best practices in literacy. This literature review will first present the most relevant ideas regarding culturally relevant pedagogy and its application to the primary classroom. Next, the National Reading Panel (2000), will be examined as it remains one of the most influential research on reading instruction, despite being more than a decade old. Also, its recommendations and application in Reading First (NCLB, 2001) will be examined. Finally, best practices in literacy will be presented, along with explanations of what those best practices are and how they are or should be implemented in the primary classroom, according to current research. The chapter ends with a summary of the literature presented.

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) coined the term culturally relevant teaching (or pedagogy) and has delineated three key aspects of this pedagogy: academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political awareness. In the same vein, Geneva Gay (2000) uses the term culturally responsive teaching to refer to that set of beliefs and practices that teachers hold and engage in that enable them to teach effectively across cultures. Gay states that such teaching evidences several characteristics: it is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and liberating. These characteristics help to paint a fuller picture of what culturally relevant teaching is.

When Ladson-Billings (2009) first conceived of the notion of culturally relevant teaching (CRT), she focused on three central attitudes/practices in the teachers studied: a “strong focus on

student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in their students” (p. xi). The first of these is a strong focus on student learning. Students are expected to work hard and achieve at high levels. High expectations are repeatedly stated by others as a necessary component of culturally relevant teaching (e.g. Gay, 2000; Thompson, 2004; Young, 2010). It is important to remember, however, that high expectations are not in themselves enough to indicate that culturally relevant teaching is taking place. Likewise, it is important to remember that high expectations do not just refer to academic achievement, but that these expectations encompass the entire child: attitudes, personal relationships, and building a sense of self-confidence and self-respect, as well as other skills, abilities, and attitudes.

Developing cultural competence is the next aspect of CRT that Ladson-Billings outlined. Developing cultural competence is nothing more or less than “providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge [while also] helping students to maintain their own culture while navigating in the mainstream culture” (Young, 2010, p. 249). These two parts, maintaining home culture confidence while learning how to interact in the mainstream culture are both critical for this second aspect of CRT to be occurring. In many classrooms, it is simple to pick up on practices that help the student to learn mainstream culture; simple items like learning to raise your hand and wait your turn are inculcating that mainstream culture constantly. The more difficult challenge is helping the student to increase in confidence in his/her own home culture. It is crucial for this purpose that many books from a wide variety of cultures be an important part of the library in every classroom. By seeing themselves in print, students feel important and respected, and that their home environment is also important (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Besides just having such books in the classroom library, however, the teacher needs to do many other things to validate home cultures of students: read books with a variety of cultures represented;

allow, and encourage, students to discuss similarities and differences between themselves and their homes, and have students write about things that are important to them (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006). Students are more likely to both read and write if they are allowed some freedom of choice in what to read and what to write. Thus strategies such as self-selected student reading and writers' workshop (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Leograndis, 2008) are two of several methods that can assist students in both maintaining their own culture and progressing in competence with the mainstream culture.

Cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in their students is the final aspect of culturally relevant teaching, as defined by Ladson-Billings. This is an important aspect of CRT because it helps to build into the student the desire to improve their lives and their world by addressing injustices found in it. This sociopolitical awareness was and is the root of all important social movements from anti-slavery movements in the 1800's to women's rights in the 1900's to the Arab uprising seen recently in the world. But this awareness does not just spring out of the ground fully grown; it requires much knowledge and understanding of the world in which people live, along with a desire to bring about change and a belief that it can happen. Primary grades teachers may think this is too advanced for their students, but sociopolitical awareness begins with knowledge – so they provide their students with knowledge: knowledge that Martin Luther King, Jr. did not just give several wonderful speeches, but that he also spent much time in jail for his actions and beliefs; knowledge that Rosa Parks was not just a tired seamstress on her way home, but an activist and an important part of the civil rights movement before that legendary bus ride. Sociopolitical awareness also requires understanding – so they provide their students with understanding: understanding that the gulf oil spill was not just an accident but that it affected their lives and their parents' lives directly in the cost of oil and gasoline going up;

understanding that the beach isn't just a nice place to visit, but a place that must be protected so sea turtles have a safe place to lay eggs and for hatchlings to scramble to the sea. Providing this knowledge and understanding to students requires the use of literacy – in reading, in searching the web for information, in writing what is known, and in discussing what is learned. One can see that by integrating content areas with reading and writing, and by wisely choosing the books to expose students to as well as the topics to discuss and write about, teachers can use literacy to build this awareness.

To get a fuller picture of what CRT is, Gay's definition that CRT demands teaching that is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and liberating is examined. Each of these characteristics will be looked at more closely, as an aspect of CRT that teachers, especially white, female teachers of minority students, should strive to incorporate into their classrooms. That is not to say that non-white and/or male teachers do not need to incorporate these aspects in their classrooms; it is only a reminder that white, female teachers hold the fate of future generations in their hands more so than any other group.

Culturally relevant teaching is validating in that it acknowledges the existence and legitimacy of various cultures represented by the students in the classroom. Care is taken to include a variety of instructional approaches that relate to different learning styles (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The typical approach to learning in schools – sedentary and passive – is augmented with learning that is engaging and active. Teachers teach “to and through” (Gay, 2000, p. 29) their students' strengths, both academically and culturally, instead of sticking with the standard, European, middle-class approach of passive, verbal learning. For the white, female teachers of most elementary schools, learning about other cultures and making an effort to incorporate the differences of those cultures into the classroom setting is an important part of



their own re-education (Pinar, 2004). They must know, understand, and accept the differences their students bring to the classroom in order for them to be sincere in their attempts to validate others' cultures. For many teachers this may mean stepping out of their comfort zone and doing the highly improbable: visiting a black church, learning a foreign language, and especially acknowledging their own biases built into their cultural framework (Paley, 1979/2000). By validating the cultures of the students in their classrooms, primary teachers earn the right to teach to those cultures and to teach students how to navigate the mainstream culture they will be enmeshed in for the majority of their lives. In considering the importance of this step, teachers must always keep in mind the focus on primary literacy skills as they relate to minority students. Validating the home cultures of students enables teachers to focus on teaching literacy skills that will be useful and freeing to minority students. Although primary students do not always understand the value of literacy, as adults who have committed to teaching "empowering literacy" (Finn, 1999), teachers must find a way to validate the cultures of the students in the classroom so that they will want the empowering literacy that the teacher offers.

Culturally relevant teaching is also comprehensive. It goes beyond the basics of teaching reading to teaching the why behind the reading. Comprehensive teaching, for all students, rejects the accountability, business-like, bottom line thinking that has overtaken public education (Pinar, 2004). Instead, these teachers make efforts to teach to the intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of the individual, while also cultivating political awareness. This is accomplished by teachers using what they know of various cultures to teach the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that their students need in order to survive in the political world they will live in. This knowledge is what is necessary to read the world (Friere & Macedo, 1987) instead of being stuck in a 'what's-the-main-idea' philosophy of reading the word. The best practices movement, while

focusing on these bottom line skills, and not considering attitudes and the development of the individual can be simply a tool to help teach the prerequisite skills needed in order to accurately read both the word and the world. Comprehensive teaching also means teaching in such a way that students develop cultural competence, grow in personal responsibility to learn and help others learn, and become committed to the ideal of success, as they personally define it (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally relevant teaching is multidimensional, just as people are multidimensional. This encompasses not only curriculum, but teaching strategies, assessments, teacher-student relationships, student peer relationships, and student self-image. Teachers teach in such a way that the strengths of not only various cultures are written into the curriculum, but so are the strengths of various aspects of the curriculum. Studies are therefore integrated, with literacy informing social studies, which informs art and music, which conversely informs social studies and science, and so on until one cannot separate one subject area from another any more than one can separate one aspect of culture from another. This type of teaching leads to students being able, and willing, to think ‘outside the box,’ to stretch themselves, to think, question, analyze, reflect, and share. In terms of literacy teaching and achievement, this means that students become more aware that literacy is a powerful tool in their lives and that they can make a better life for themselves by pursuing excellence in literacy. Literacy skills acquisition is just a means to that path (Finn, 1999; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Macedo, 2006).

The empowering aspect of culturally relevant teaching closely mirrors the teachings of Paulo Freire in his career as a literacy educator (Freire, 1970/1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987), as does the liberating aspect of CRT, which will be discussed later. Literacy in itself is seen as

empowering, when not taught in a skills-oriented, mechanistic way, but when taught as a way for students to improve their own lives and the lives of the people in their families and neighborhoods; that is, when literacy is seen and taught as a power that some people have that others can acquire to read the world around them instead of just to read a job application (Finn, 1999; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1987; Macedo, 2006). This empowering education leads students into academic success, personal confidence, courage to take risks in the classroom and in life, and the will to act to improve themselves and challenge the status quo. Culturally relevant teachers who teach to empowerment understand that learning requires risk-taking and create a safe environment for students. Part of this safe environment is providing opportunities to be successful by differentiating the curriculum so that students are taught at their level of need not just at the level the school and curriculum state they should be taught. This differentiation allows for and encourages success, and success translates into a greater self-confidence and a greater willingness to take risks in learning.

Culturally relevant teaching is transformative. That is, it is “explicit about respecting the cultures and experiences of [minority students] and it uses these worthwhile resources for teaching and learning” (Gay, 2000, p. 33). The transformative nature of CRT makes academic success a “non-negotiable mandate” (Gay, 2000, p. 34) for all students and provides the way for them to achieve that success. Academic success, however, is not translated as simply being the achievement of high grades and high scores on standardized tests. Instead it is seen as having students develop the knowledge, skills, values, understandings, and abilities to critically view their world, and take steps to make it a more equitable world, whether in the classroom, on the playground, in the neighborhood, or in society at large. Transformative education not only

transforms the student, but calls upon him/her to transform his/her world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Macedo, 2006).

Finally, culturally relevant teaching is liberating. As a liberating force, CRT frees the student from the pressure to conform to mainstream ways of thinking and doing, and instead allows them to become authentic representatives of their own culture while accessing the symbols and practices of power that reside in a liberating literacy (Finn, 1999; Macedo, 2006). Gay (2000) states that this freedom

allows students to focus more closely and concentrate more thoroughly on academic learning tasks. The results are improved achievement of many kinds. Among them are more clear and insightful thinking; more caring, concerned, and humane interpersonal skills; better understanding of interconnections among individual, local, national, ethnic, global, and human identities; and acceptance of knowledge as something to be continuously shared, critiqued, revised, and renewed. (p. 35)

The definition arrived at earlier for culturally relevant teaching was *a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes, make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for minority students, and that teaches to the highest standards*. This definition did not include the terms discussed above of culturally relevant teaching being validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and liberating. Nor did it include the terms academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political awareness. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the reader can see how each of these characteristics are embodied in the definition.

In addition to understanding intellectually what culturally relevant teaching means, it is helpful to see it in action in classrooms, through the eyes of researchers. There are,

unfortunately, few studies that give us that view of translating research and theory into practice (Ullucci, 2011). While a hindrance to learning, as modeling is an effective tool for adults as well as children, the lack of examples of CRT in action has a philosophical base in the literature. That is, there is a wariness in giving examples of CRT in practice that these practices might be seen as a quick fix, or simple and sure solutions to complex problems. Culturally relevant pedagogy is, above all, not a series of things to do by a philosophical position to take that should impact the practitioner's view and implementation of all aspect of the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Ullucci, 2011).

This paper, then, can only present the barest of pictures: it can provide glimpses of the practice to illuminate understanding. Certain practices may reveal if teachers are attempting to engage in CRT, among these the practices of discussion, student directed learning, and supplementing the curriculum with multicultural materials throughout the year instead of in a limited manner such as Black History Month unit or Cinco de Mayo celebration (Ullucci, 2011). Discussion can be used by teachers to guide students to discover knowledge for themselves, as, for example, by coming to the conclusion that what Cesar Chavez fought for (fair wages for farm workers) was a just position to take. Student directed learning, as students are allowed to explore ideas that excite them, can engage otherwise disaffected students, while supplemental materials can take teachers and students beyond the bare bones information and strategies found in textbook teaching. Other strategies that have been found to mesh well with CRT are literacy centers, guided reading, and modeling (Shealey, 2007). Literacy centers allow students to process skills already taught in a social, contextual, and self-motivating manner. Guided reading, where students have the opportunity to exercise their skills of comprehension and critical thinking, is usually conducted in small group settings, which are advantageous to all students

(Cunningham & Allington, 2007). Teacher modeling, where teachers engage in think-alouds, can help students grasp the intricacies of reading skills as applied to real texts (Duffy, 2003). Another way of practicing CRT in the classroom is by having adequate texts on hand for a variety of reading preferences. Husband (2012) in discussing the particular plight of black boys in regards to reading, points out that boys in general, and black boys in particular, prefer a different type of textual experience than is commonly found in primary classrooms: an experience with texts that focus on non-fiction, scary stories, super heroes and video games. This fact should motivate teachers to ensure that these types of texts are available in the classroom, whether from the school media center, the public library, or the teacher's classroom library. Other methods that may be incorporated into the CRT classroom include stimulating and active activities as opposed to the more traditional passive activities such as lectures and worksheets. Many researchers (Callins, 2006, Gay, 2000; Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009) encourage high expectations for all students as a critical part of CRT in the classroom; communicating these expectations through word and deed is an important task for the teacher to undertake. Finally, CRT promotes the idea of finding alternatives to suspension and expulsion as disciplinary measures, as these out-of-school times negatively impact long term learning (Husband, 2012).

Hopefully, this brief discussion of what culturally relevant teaching looks like in the classroom has made clearer to the reader just what culturally relevant teaching is. It is with that hope that the topic of the National Reading Panel and the best practices movement will be addressed. As a new topic is undertaken, however, the reader needs to keep in mind always that CRT is a non-negotiable in today's classrooms, no matter how skills-oriented the mandates of the NRP and best practices, as interpreted by states and districts and handed down to teachers to implement, has become.

## **The National Reading Panel and Reading First**

In 1997 Congress passed a law requiring a panel to be convened whose purpose would be to determine what works in teaching reading. The impetus for this panel was the decades-long debate over various approaches to reading instruction. This debate generated much attention in the media and in the profession, but failed to ever resolve the question of how children best learn to read. Consequently, the National Reading Panel was convened, with the hope that a Congressional panel could put to rest the debates that had ebbed and flowed since the early years of the twentieth century.

The fourteen members of the National Reading Panel were chosen from more than 300 nominees, many of whom had to be eliminated from consideration because of monetary ties to various reading programs. The panelists were chosen by then-director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Duane Alexander, in consultation with then-Secretary of Education Richard Riley. Among those selected for the panel were primarily university professors and researchers, along with one middle school teacher and one school superintendent. There were no teachers of early reading on the panel, nor did any review the report before it was finalized (Cunningham, 2002). The first meeting of the panel was held in April 1998 in Washington, DC. The panel decided in summer of 1998 to focus their review of the literature on experimental or quasi-experimental studies only, eliminating from the outset the vast majority of educational research that is qualitative in nature. Panel member Timothy Shanahan stated that this decision was not because the panel did not

recognize the value of qualitative studies or of other quantitative methodologies, but rather because of the nature of the determinations [the panel had been] charged with making. Experiments and quasi-experiments are the only research methods that try out a

technique under real classroom conditions to determine their impact on learning,...

(Shanahan, 1999, Procedures for the Scientific Review section, para. 2).

The NRP was initially given until December 1998 to publish their report, but Congress extended that deadline, and the final report was published in early 2000.

Although there had been other federally funded studies of reading in the past, the NRP differed from the outset in its focus on only a narrow slice of research. As Cunningham (2002) states, “The members boldly assert that they have differentiated the small amount of scientific, objective, and rigorous reading research from the great quantity of reading research that fails to merit [in their view] one or more of these lofty labels” (p.53). This narrow focus on only select studies is one of the complaints against the NRP.

An additional complaint against the panel was that their goal, to find what works in reading for all children, was simply not realistic. Since the publication of the First Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), the consensus in the reading profession has revolved around the conclusion that methods and materials matter far less than teachers (Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009). That is, in the hands of expert teachers, any materials and methods can be successful in teaching reading to students, but even the best, most ‘research-proven’ curricula in the hands of a non-expert teacher will be less than successful. Stated another way, any curriculum will work for some children somewhere, but no curriculum will work for all children everywhere (Allington, 2002; Cunningham, 2002).

The final report of the NRP focused on what have come to be known as the five pillars (Allington, 2005) of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. It must be remembered in all discussions about the NRP and its findings that only about 500 experimental and quasi-experimental studies were reviewed and that thousands of



other studies were deemed to not have reliable enough information to be included in the report. Since its publication, the five pillars have been translated into reading programs, mandates, and laws. Shortly after its publication, the NRP report strongly influenced the ESEA revision known as the No Child Left Behind Act, and was used to craft the federal government's Reading First initiative imbedded in that legislation. Perhaps the most prominent complaint against the panel, and Reading First, has been the narrow focus on just five aspects of reading to the exclusion of other elements such as writing, self-selected reading, background knowledge, and motivation (Duke & Block, 2012; Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007).

Reading First was the federal government's largest investment in primary education to date, distributing a billion dollars a year to states who then dispensed the money to local districts. The lofty goal of Reading First was to ensure that all children could read at grade level by the end of third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This target grade was crucial because research has shown that students who are poor readers at the end of third grade are likely to remain poor readers all their lives (Juel, 1988; Learning Point Associates, 2004).

The NRP report was the driving force behind emphasizing the five aspects of early reading skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This emphasis seems to have led to a decreased emphasis in content area learning, or a narrowing of the curriculum, which in turn then reduces the mastery of content-rich vocabulary that supports upper grade learning (Duke & Block, 2012; Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). In addition to these five components of early reading, the program also focused on using valid and reliable assessments to guide literacy instruction as well as evaluate progress, overhauling curriculum to align with the five pillars, providing professional development to primary teachers so that they not only knew what they were to teach, but why and how, and developing strong instructional

leadership at the district and school levels (Learning Point Associates, 2004). The instructional emphasis was on explicit and systematic teaching. Explicit teaching is teaching that is focused and clear, and provides much teacher modeling, while systematic instruction is planned, sequenced, and comprehensive (Wong-Ratcliff, Powell, Cage, & Chen, 2011). The focus in Reading First schools on the five pillars of early reading instruction has likely filtered into other educational arenas (Pearson, 2010), thus building the focus on these five pillars beyond the impact on Reading First. While it cannot be argued that these are unessential skills, the curricular focus on this narrow subsection of reading abilities has, in the opinion of some, led to a curriculum gap that will, in the long run, exacerbate the achievement gap (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007).

The results of studies conducted on the benefits of the Reading First program were mixed (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2009). While the federal government's report seemed to indicate that the results were not positive (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008; Herlihy, Kemple, Bloom, Zhu, & Berlin, 2009), several individual state reports showed the opposite (Bean, Draper, Turner, & Zigmond, 2010; Dole, Hosp, Nelson, & Hosp, 2010; Carlisle, Cortina, & Zeng, 2010; Foorman, Perscher, Lefsky, & Toste, 2010; Wong-Ratcliff, Powell, Cage, & Chen, 2011). These results focused almost exclusively on reading comprehension scores on either norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests. The report by Gamse and associates (2008) indicated no growth in reading comprehension abilities at the first, second, or third grade level, when compared with non-Reading First schools, but did indicate an increase in decoding ability at first grade. The report also showed an increased amount of time spent on reading instruction, which lends credence to the view that Reading First resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum.

The individual state reports cited above were from Michigan (Carlisle, Cortina, & Zeng, 2010), Florida (Foorman, Perscher, Lefsky, & Toste, 2010), Louisiana (Wong-Ratcliff, Powell, Cage, & Chen, 2011), Utah (Dole, Hosp, Nelson, & Hosp, 2010), and Pennsylvania (Bean, Draper, Turner, & Zigmond, 2010). These reports used a variety of methods to compare Reading First and non-Reading First schools, but uniformly came up with the same conclusion: Reading First monies resulted in an increase in reading comprehension scores on a variety of assessments. In addition to the gains shown in most individual state reports, the Michigan and Florida reports indicated a slight narrowing of the achievement gap over the years of Reading First implementation. While no similar state report could be located for Georgia which focused on student achievement, the federal government's summary of Georgia's Reading First program shows mostly negative results on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Third graders showed an increase in word analysis and spelling, but a decrease in vocabulary with no significant changes in reading comprehension or listening skills over a three year period at the beginning of the Reading First implementation. The CRCT results were similarly discouraging, with no gains shown in reading comprehension abilities at third grade, and a decrease shown in the years following implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards instead of the Quality Core Curriculum standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). While discussing Reading First initiative that was designed on the findings of the NRP, it is important to note that the government's own conclusions about the effectiveness of Reading First calls into question the assumptions on which it was based (Herlihy, Kemple, Bloom, Zhu, & Berlin, 2009). Indeed, the strongest evidence of growth in students' reading abilities came in those states that showed the greatest gains in teacher knowledge. This points again to the idea that the teacher matters more than the curriculum (Duke & Block, 2012).

Perhaps the most discouraging finding for Reading First is that in the years it was in existence the National Assessment of Reading Progress showed little change for fourth grade reading comprehension achievement (NCES, 2011a). The achievement gap remained largely untouched, calling into question the state level results reported. There is no question, however, that Reading First did improve the emphasis on certain early literacy skills in Reading First schools, and perhaps across the board (Pearson, 2010). What might be questioned is whether the emphasis placed on five subskills of reading was the right emphasis, or if other skills associated with reading success need just as much emphasis. Alternatively, the amount of instructional time spent on some aspects of these five skills appears to be uneven and in need of greater emphasis, particularly with regards to vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction (Duke & Block, 2012).

Since the publication of the NRP and the enshrinement in legislation of the five pillars of early reading skills, the best practices movement has expanded upon the five pillars, but again by sticking only with research that meets the NRP definition (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). The best practices movement has been an improvement on the NRP and Reading First in that it has addressed, and continues to address, many areas that the NRP neglected. Nonetheless, the movement is hampered by the need to rely on only a narrow subsection of research.

Despite the many criticisms of the NRP and Reading First, the fact remains that the two together, with their emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, remain the single largest influencer of reading education in the United States today. The best practices movement has picked up where the NRP and Reading First left off, trying to consolidate the understandings of literacy teaching in such a way that what is learned through research can be easily transferred to the classroom. While maintaining the NRP's focus

on scientifically-based reading research, it is nonetheless commendable that the best practices movement has attempted to expand on the five basic components selected by the NRP and provide a more well-rounded understanding of literacy education. The components of literacy education, as envisioned by the best practices movement, are discussed next.

### **Best Practices in Literacy**

Best Practices is one of those terms that comes along in educational circles every so often that it seems everyone uses but is seldom defined. Other similar terms include guided reading, authentic assessment, and student agency. But in order to discuss best practices in literacy, we must first have a clear idea of what best practices are. This is a term that comes from the world of medicine, law, and architecture. It refers to “solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, p. vi). It has been adopted in educational circles as a term used to describe what research indicates is a better way of teaching in the classroom than other practices. Educational researchers use the term as a bridge of sorts to get research into the classroom. Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde define the term as “serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible state-of-the-art teaching” (2005, p. vi). Simply stated it is the best, according to research, way of doing something particular. *In Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni define best practices as “evidence-based practices that promote high rates of achievement....an instructional practice with a record of success that is both trustworthy and valid.” (2011, p. 17). That definition closely reflects the working definition of this paper, which is that ‘*best practices are what effective teachers do in the classroom to increase literacy learning for all students.*’ Given this definition, some practices come immediately to mind that are definitely not best practices: round-robin reading, copying definitions from a dictionary, and writing sentences with spelling words are just a few of these.

The challenge has been, and continues to be, to find a way to get the best practices proven in educational research out of the research arena and into the classroom arena. To do this, it is necessary to identify particular practices, not just say something generic, like ‘all teachers should be using best practices’ and assume teachers know what they are.

In *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni identify ten best practices for literacy instruction (2011, p. 21). They state that these ten practices are “generally accepted by experts in the field” and that the authors of the various chapters will “address and expand on the broad research consensus that supports” the ten identified “evidence-based best practices.” These ten best practices for comprehensive literacy instruction state that the literacy teacher will: (1) Create a classroom culture that fosters motivation; (2) Teach reading for authentic meaning-making purposes: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task; (3) Provide students with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension to promote independent reading; (4) Give students time for self-selected independent reading; (5) Provide students with high-quality literature across a wide range of genres; (6) Use multiple texts that build on prior knowledge, link concepts, and expand vocabulary; (7) Build a whole-class context that emphasizes community and collaboration; (8) Balance teacher- and student-led discussion of texts; (9) Integrate technologies that link and expand concepts; and (10) Differentiate instruction using a variety of instructionally relevant assessments.

But even this list is very broad and somewhat vague. What exactly does a teacher *do* who is creating a culture that fosters motivation or providing scaffolded instruction in a variety of areas? We will look more closely at some of these best practices to determine what a teacher who engages in them would actually be doing during the school day, and more specifically how

implementing these various practice could be accomplished in a classroom that is committed to CRT. The previous list, although contained in a book entitled *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* is neither the only list of ‘best practices’ available, nor necessarily the most thorough or comprehensive list.

Pressley, et al. (2001) compiled a list of more than 100 behaviors an effective first grade teacher of literacy exhibits, although these behaviors were categorized under seven broad headings. The categories were: (1) having excellent classroom management, (2) creating a positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment; (3) explicitly teaching reading skills; (4) emphasizing excellent literature; (5) including much reading and writing by the students; (6) matching the demands of the curriculum with the students’ abilities and confidence, all the while maintaining the scaffolded support and monitoring that is needed and (7) encouraging student self-regulation. This list overlaps in some details with the list from Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni. For example Pressley et al.’s items of “explicitly teaching reading skills” and “creating a positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment” corresponds with Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni’s items of “provide students with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension” and “build a whole-class context that emphasizes community and collaboration.” Other comparisons could likewise be made. As a side note, it is important to realize that the fact that Pressley, et al. do not include any mention of technology in their lists speaks more to the age of the research than the importance of technology.

A third study, by Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998), found the following eight characteristics prevalent in the classroom practice of highly effective first grade teachers: (1) instructional balance; (2) instructional density; (3) extensive use of scaffolding; (4)

encouragement of self-regulation; (5) thorough integration of reading and writing activities; (6) high expectations for all students; (7) masterful classroom management; and (8) awareness of purpose of practices. Although there are some new items on this list, such as awareness of purpose of practices and instructional density, there is much overlap with the previous two lists. In addition to these three resources, there are entire books written on best practices in just one aspect of literacy, such as *Comprehension Instruction: Research Based Best Practices* (Block, & Pressley, 2008), and broad categories of teaching, such as *Best Practice: Today's Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Of course, even books without 'best practices' in the title, often present practices that are, in the author's opinion, best practices. *The Fluent Reader* by Rasinski (2003), and *Classrooms That Work: They All Can Read and Write*, by Cunningham and Allington (2007) are just two books that fall in this category. Because there is such a proliferation of information, this paper will rely on the three lists enumerated above to choose which practices to focus on during this research project for the best practices in literacy, with support from various other studies and books.

By combining similar items on each list above, I end up with a list of nine practices in which a teacher of literacy should engage. Although this research will primarily focus only on those practices involving phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, it is important to get a fuller idea of what an accomplished reading teacher does in his/her classroom. Therefore, each of the following items will be discussed briefly, while the major focus remains on explicit teaching. In addition to items on this list being based on the three lists above, some items have also been expanded on by further readings in *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Morrow & Gambrell, Eds., 2011). The nine best practices that combined the lists above are: (1) Having excellent classroom management; (2) Creating a positive,



cooperative, and motivating classroom environment; (3) Having high expectations for all students; (4) Providing scaffolded support for students in all areas of literacy; (5) Having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day, including self-selected, independent reading; (6) Providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres; (7) Differentiating instruction through the use of whole group teaching, small group instruction, and individualized attention; (8) Using a variety of formative assessments to guide instruction; and (9) Explicitly teaching reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing. Each item on this list will be looked at individually to discuss what the practice would look like in the classroom. These are brief discussions, with the exception of explicitly teaches reading skills; because it is the focus of this study, this category will be addressed last.

**Exemplary classroom management.** Having excellent classroom management is a necessary precursor to having excellent literacy instruction (Allington, 2005), while excellent instruction greatly assists in creating a classroom with few management problems. If the classroom is in chaos, then it does not matter how well-informed the teacher is in best practices, he/she will not be able to teach effectively. This behavior of classroom teachers came first in the list of best practices by Pressley, et al. (2001) for good reason: it is a “hallmark of effective classrooms in general” (2001, p. 45). Good classroom management is not enough in itself to qualify a teacher as engaging in best practices for literacy, but it is the foundation (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Without superb management of the classroom, a teacher cannot create the literacy focused environment that is essential to student achievement.

What does a classroom look like if the teacher has excellent classroom management skills? It is distinguished by the presence of established rules and procedures as well as an

absence of ongoing disruptions to the learning environment. While no teacher can eliminate all discipline problems, there is a significant difference between the classrooms of teachers with effective classroom management skills, and those without these skills (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). One sign that the classroom is being run by an adept classroom manager includes well-identified rules and procedures. That is, expectations of positive behavior are clearly communicated, often posted in the classroom, and known consequences established. These rules and procedures are taught directly and reinforced frequently. Another sign is that the teacher knows about and uses effective instructional strategies. Reinforcing positive behavior and effectively responding to violations of the established expectations are also signs of good classroom management. (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Because there is never a complete absence of disciplinary infractions, the well-run classroom is not characterized by no off-task behavior, but by less such behavior: less talking, less disrespect, and less out-of-seat/space behaviors. Instead, students are seen working in groups, pairs, or individually, on academic projects that may require them to talk in a quiet voice with each other. The teacher is not sitting at her desk, but is up and about in the classroom, even when all students are engaged in individual work (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). In short, the class is running smoothly, and there are few or no significant disruptions. (Thompson, 2004). Some strategies that might be used for classroom management include a positive rewards system such as Positive Behavior Support (PBS), student conferences, relationship-building with the students, and positive communication between home and family, establishing an openness from the home towards the school that can be used when behavior problems do occur. (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Watson & Ecken, 2003; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). The importance of good classroom management cannot be overstated: students who are beneficiaries

of this type of environment receive more academic instruction, and are less likely to have long-term negative academic, behavioral, and social outcomes that plague students in other environments (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Additionally, teachers with good classroom management skills are more likely to stay in the profession, teach effectively, and have positive feelings towards and relationships with their students (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Obviously, exemplary classroom management is crucial for implementation of best practices in literacy. How classroom management is impacted by a culturally relevant framework is examined next.

The classroom where the teacher is practicing culturally relevant pedagogy would still be managed superbly by the teacher, but there would also be distinctive of CRT present. This teacher knows about and respects the home culture of his/her students, acknowledges that cultural differences exist instead of insisting on emphasizing a color-blindness approach to teaching, and understands that the majority culture of schools can purposefully or incidentally practice discrimination (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003). How this approach plays out in the classroom is through still communicating majority norms such as taking turns in talking, but also communicating that the norms are not inherently better than cultural norms that may emphasize, for example, jumping into a class discussion or not participating at all.

Culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM), includes the practices of creating a classroom environment that is welcoming and supportive of both academic and social goals, communicating with students in a culturally sensitive manner, working with families, and creating a caring classroom environment (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). For example, talking at the same time as another person, a common practice in casual settings in many cultures, is considered rude in the

classroom. This does not make the practice itself wrong, only wrong for the classroom setting, except in certain situations (e.g. group work, when each group is working as one unit).

Additionally, appropriate behavioral interventions are used, without an overreliance on one form of discipline for some students but not for others, as with the preponderance of suspension (both ISS and OSS) for African American boys (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

**Positive classroom environment.** There are plenty of classroom teachers who manage their classes quite effectively, but do so through fear and intimidation. To create a safe environment where students feel free to take the risks necessary to engage in and master literacy habits, however, fear and intimidation need to be replaced with a positive atmosphere (Guthrie, 2011). When a classroom teacher makes the effort to create a positive, cooperative, and motivating environment, students get the message that they are important people; people worth caring about and people worth spending time to encourage and get to know. This is at least as important in a classroom committed to CRT as any other classroom. As one of the teachers profiled by Ladson-Billings (2009) stated, students are important people and we need to let them know that by what we say and do. This teacher-student relationship in turn builds the students' motivation and desire to persevere through difficult tasks. A student who knows that his/her teacher believes he/she can be successful with literacy and other classroom tasks will try that much harder to be successful (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Thompson, 2004; Watson & Ecken, 2003).

What does this classroom look like? As with the classroom management piece, it is noticeable for some absences as well as for the presence of positive behaviors. There are few if any worksheets in this classroom (Tate, 2003), and generally the desks will not be placed in the traditional rows, with each desk separated from everyone else. This style of seating does not make cooperative learning very practical. Another absence may be a teacher desk; since the

teacher is up and about in her/his classroom all the time, a desk may be an unnecessary use of space and instead the teacher may just have small work corner with a laptop computer. What you will see – or rather hear – in a classroom that is positive, cooperative, and motivating is a lot of teacher praise and encouragement (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013). Students will be allowed to work together and will have long-term reading and writing projects that they are working on (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). This is a place of safety, where students take risks in their reading and writing, and the teacher gently guides and corrects as necessary. Strategies that may be used in such a classroom include morning meeting, cooperative learning, jigsaw learning, and guided reading (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Kreite, 2002; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002).

**High expectations.** Classrooms that are marked by best practices in literacy have high expectations for all students; this is true also for classrooms committed to CRT (e.g. Finn, 1999; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 2009). High expectations mean that students are expected not only to work to the best of their ability, but to achieve to the best of their ability. No excuses are made or accepted for less than a student's best effort. This does not mean that every student is expected to achieve at the same level, but that every student is expected to achieve at the highest possible level for him or her. Teachers view education as the students' job, and expect students to work hard every day, all day. Expectations are not lowered because of family issues, cultural background, or previous experiences (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Thompson, 2004). Students from all cultures and backgrounds are expected to aim for the highest achievement possible and to work hard to get there. Expectations are and remain high for all students.

What does this look like in practice? These teachers very likely have stashes of granola bars and yogurt for students who miss breakfast, they can be heard constantly encouraging better effort with phrases such as, “You are working really hard on your story; I can’t wait to see what happens next” instead of phrases such as “I cannot believe you have only written three sentences!” These teachers are seen reteaching repeatedly until everyone in the class has mastered a concept, and then even after moving on, check for permanence of understanding (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). These teachers also hand back work to be corrected or redone if they think the student’s best effort was not applied. Students quickly learn that a half-hearted effort is not worth the bother of having to do an assignment twice, and so work harder to get it correct the first time. Another hallmark of high expectations is what Tomlinson and Javrus (2012) refer to as “teaching up.” This is teaching that provides opportunities for problem-solving, group work, using higher-order thinking skills, and transfer of learning.

**Scaffolded support.** Scaffolds are common in the building trades, as workers apply their skills to areas of a building that are high off the ground, a scaffold is needed to help them successfully complete their tasks. Scaffolds are used in the same manner in education. When a task a student needs to complete is ‘too high off the ground’ – that is too difficult for him/her to complete by him/herself – then a scaffold is provided by the teacher to help the student be successful. Scaffolds in the building trades are removed gradually as portions of the task are completed. In the same manner, scaffolding by the teacher is removed gradually from the student, as he/she masters the skill being supported. Reutzel (2011) states that

At first we provide a great deal of support [through scaffolding] to help students begin to take ownership of the mental processes used to apply a literacy concept, skill, or strategy. Over time, we reduce the amount of assistance we provide to students as they gradually

take ownership for applying reading and writing processes and become increasingly independent, self-regulated readers and writers. (p. 417-418)

How does this look in the classroom? Teachers that use scaffolding can be seen working with a wide variety of group sizes: whole, small, pairs, and individuals. This variety of assistance is necessary because not every student needs the same level of support from the teacher (Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Delavan, 2009). This teacher will definitely not be seen sitting at her desk, not even sitting at her desk and conferring with students; instead he/she will be conferring with students at their desks, so that instructional time is used to the maximum (i.e. no-one is waiting in line to see the teacher, they are all continuing to work while waiting for the teacher to come to them). Providing scaffolded support to students is a key aspect of individualized, differentiated, and exemplary instruction. (Ladson-Billings 2009; Reutzel, 2011).

**Authentic reading and writing tasks.** Students need a reason to read and write, a reason that goes beyond ‘because I said so’ – thus, the need for authentic reading and writing tasks in the classroom. Authentic reading tasks include reading for enjoyment, reading to learn something, and reading to accomplish a task. Examples of these would be reading a novel, reading the newspaper, searching the Internet for the best prices on a refrigerator, or reading a recipe. As adults, we read for purpose all the time, but as teachers we need to teach our students how to read for purpose. Authentic writing tasks might include writing letters or emails to real people (a friend, a relative, a politician), writing to present something the student has learned to the class, creating a digital presentation, or writing to tell a story. These types of authentic reasons for reading and writing can be highly motivating to students and should be a part of every best practices classroom.

What would this look like in the classroom? Many of the tasks mentioned later under exemplary teaching could be included here as well. The classroom would have a large library with a variety of books of varying levels of difficulty and on varying interests that students could read during their self-selected reading time (Duffy, 2003; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). Also there would be a dedicated reading time and a dedicated writing time (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Evidence of students reading, through response to literature activities such as book recommendations, and story maps would be seen. Evidence of student writing would also be seen and might include stories created, poems written, and expository reports on topics of interest to the students. The daily schedule, if posted would have the times for reading and writing clearly indicated (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). Strategies included here might be self-selected reading, literature response activities, and guided reading (Duffy, 2003).

**High quality literature.** There may be a place for vocabulary controlled readers in the best practices classroom, but it is not a prominent place. Instead, the teacher engages students in a variety of settings with high-quality children's literature: Literature that is interesting, engaging, and thought-provoking (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). High quality literature is an important place for teachers to ensure that they are teaching in a culturally responsive manner. Literature selections should reflect not just middle-class, white Americans and mainstream values, but represent a wide variety of cultures, values, and life experiences (Souto-Maning, 2009). High quality literature is much more readily available that reflects these themes than in decades past, so no teacher pursuing CRT should be at a loss to find excellent, culturally varied books to share with his/her class. This is the type of literature that lends itself to discussions and practice with comprehension skills. It is also a fertile ground for new vocabulary, and extends



student background knowledge. The teacher often reads materials that is too challenging for students to read on their own (Block, Oaker, & Hurt, 2002; Pressley, et al. 2001; Souto-Maning, 2009). In the classroom this can be seen most easily through daily read-alouds. This read-aloud time is not just for the enjoyment of the students, or the teacher, but is a critical part of the teaching in a best practices classroom. Reading aloud provides students with a model of fluent reading, frequent think-alouds by the teacher to ‘show’ how readers think, a model of excellent writing, an opportunity to discuss and practice comprehension skills, and exposure to new and interesting vocabulary (Kimbell-Lopez, 2003; Trelease, 2006). Additionally, the teacher’s enthusiasm for reading books during the read-aloud time can increase students’ motivation to read on their own – particularly to read the book just read.

**Differentiation.** Differentiation, much like culturally relevant teaching, is a mindset that a teacher possesses, not just a list of things to do (Tomlinson & Imbeaue, 2010). This is a key aspect of best practices, and is also important in the CRT classroom. Differentiation refers not merely to the instructional practices the teacher engages in, but to all aspects of the teaching process. Differentiation, therefore, means having different strategies to teach content with, but also teaching different content when necessary. It means providing students with choices in how they demonstrate mastery of the content: an essay, a poster, a technological presentation, or a 3-D model, for example. It means not just responding to student differences but proactively planning to accommodate those differences. Differentiation involves planning a positive learning environment, providing high-quality curriculum, and using formative and summative assessments to guide teacher decision making. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to meet the needs of the students in a typical classroom without differentiation (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Differentiation itself is likewise, practically impossible to do without using small groups

and individualized attention. (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Attempting to manage the classroom by choosing a whole-group instructional model often results in little differentiation and could result in the most at-risk students underachieving and thus being left farther behind in the educational process (Reutzel, 2011). Differentiated instruction is based on the needs of the students, not on a pacing guide, a textbook, or any other outside authority. In any particular classroom, students may exhibit a range of reading proficiency that evidences a two to six year spread (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). It is impossible to meet the needs of each of these children without differentiation. Differentiation also means considering the differing cultural and familial backgrounds of the students in the class. CRT requires differentiation, not just for differing levels of achievement, but for differing backgrounds, knowledge base, and experiences (Cummins, 2008; Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). Another aspect of differentiation is providing the teaching that leads to higher achievement to all students, not just the gifted. That is, all students can benefit from the instructional environment that engages them, focuses on making meaning from various resources, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking skills (Tomlinson & Javius, 2012).

So what does differentiation look like in the classroom? Again, like so many other points that have been made, it is seen as much by a lack of practices as a presence. There would be few worksheets, because worksheets are impossible to differentiate – they are simply one level of instructional presentation that leaves some student bored and other struggling, while those in the middle plod through a seemingly mindless activity (Tate, 2003). What would be seen in a differentiated classroom would be grouping work: whole group, small groups, individualized work, pairs and small groups of students working together (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). There would be a range of books available in the classroom library,

from very easy to more challenging, and there would be ways for students to respond to their reading, again in ways that range from easy to challenging (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). There would be much writing going on, because writing is an activity that is automatically differentiated – no student can write above his/her level of understanding and skill, although teachers can teach the skills necessary to raise that level of expertise (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Legrandis, 2008). In short, such a classroom would be an arranged environment where students are clear about behavioral and academic expectations, and where students work collaboratively together on a variety of learning opportunities, in a variety of grouping formats. This environment would support individual student literacy achievement, and encourage children to become independent and self-motivated learners (Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Reutzel, 2011; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

**Formative assessments.** Assessment, as it has been unfortunately tied to the idea of high-stakes testing, has become something of a ‘dirty word’ (Afflerbach, 2005). However, formative assessment is a key feature of a best practices classroom and needs to be differentiated from high-stakes summative assessments. Continuous informal assessments lead to excellent teaching, because the teacher knows what each student understands and where each student’s weaknesses are (Afflerbach, Kim, Crassas, and Cho, 2011; Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Bailey, Heritage, & Stipek, 2008). Such assessment allows the teacher the flexibility to respond to student needs in a quick manner, without the student suffering through misunderstanding and anxiety for an extended period of time. Ongoing assessment, which should be quick and easy, and may be as simple as teacher observation, can inform our instruction and provide us with a summative benchmark of where each student is. As Afflerbach, Kim, Crassas, and Cho (2011) state:

We can use the results of our assessment in a formative manner, to immediately shape our understanding of the developing reader and related instruction. We can also use the results in a summative manner, as they provide evidence that the student has (or has not) met a key learning goal. (p. 321).

Formative assessment must always trump summative assessment in making instructional and placement decisions for students. “Effective teachers know that no test can truly measure the depth and breadth of students’ knowledge....they understand that multiple ways of assessing what students know...should be used” (Thompson, 2004, p. 62).

What does this look like in a classroom? The teacher would probably use running records to monitor student growth in reading, as well as checklists of skills to see which students need extra instruction or support (Bailey, Heritage, & Stipek, 2008). The teacher would be constantly monitoring student learning, and in a small group setting would be able to focus on one child’s reading despite the fact that four other children are reading at the same time. He/she would notice which students are struggling with various aspects of reading or writing and make notes about those struggles in order to monitor how much support, or scaffolding, is offered and when to remove it. (Afflerbach, Kim, Crassas, and Cho, 2011; Bailey, Heritage, & Stipek, 2008)

**Explicit instruction.** Explicit instruction is an inescapable hallmark of best practices in literacy. This can easily be seen in the fact that hardly a chapter goes by in *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* without it being mentioned (e.g. Allington, 2011; Almasi & Hart, 2011; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2011; Madda, Griffo, Pearson, & Raphael, 2011). Archer and Hughes define explicit instruction as “instruction that is systematic, direct, engaging, and success oriented.” (2011). I find this a particularly useful definition, especially in relation to integrating explicit instruction with CRT. First, explicit instruction is systematic. The teacher understands

that there may be gaps in her students' knowledge and a systematic approach will help to find and plug all those gaps. No assumptions are made about what a student knows prior to arriving in the teacher's classroom, while at the same time the teacher respects the knowledge the student does bring to class. Second, explicit instruction is direct. There are no games being played, making students guess what the teachers means or expects of them. All instruction is directly to the point. But being direct does not mean that the instruction is not culturally sensitive. Third, explicit instruction is engaging. Here is where my commitment to CRT really integrates well with explicit instruction. As a teacher I want to choose and use texts to teach basic literacy skills that are engaging to my students – and these texts must include a wide variety of cultural representations for them to be engaging for all students. Furthermore, I must learn to respect different ways of responding to text, for example, the common 'call and response' method of African American children (Gay, 2000), and while teaching them that this may not always be appropriate in a classroom setting, not disparage the practice. In fact, I might even plan on some texts using the call and response technique to expound upon the text. When doing so, I would have to teach my non-African American students what call and response is and looks/sounds like so that they, too, can participate. Last, explicit instruction is success oriented. This final characteristic of explicit instruction harkens back to some of the other aspects of best practices including having high expectations, using high quality literature, and having a positive and supportive classroom environment. Explicit instruction is not the creativity-killing bogeyman it is often assumed to be (and that it can be), but is merely a tool a teacher uses to be direct in all his/her teaching so that students understand clearly both what is being taught and what is expected.

There are six specific areas of instruction mentioned in this point: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. The first five should be recognizable as the five key areas identified by the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000). I have chosen to add writing for the reason that much research has shown that learning to read and learning to write are inextricably linked (Allington, 2005; Iaquinta 2006). The better a student writes, the better he/she will read and the better he/she reads, the better he/she will write. Aside from the mutual benefit that reading and writing provide to each other, it has been shown that writing can be a motivating factor in reading (Iaquinta, 2006). That is, as students begin to identify themselves as authors, they begin to value the work of other authors (i.e. books) more. Now the question is, what does classroom practice look like that is providing explicit instruction in these six areas? This is a very challenging question to answer, because the focus of this study is on kindergarten through third grade, and Block, Oaker, and Hurt (2002) have demonstrated that different practices will be seen at different grade levels. Many of their findings are represented below, separated out according to specific skill areas. Other findings may not fit into these areas (e.g. finding on motivation or classroom atmosphere). The list of behaviors generated by Pressley et al. (2001) was also used in generating the following typical behaviors per skill area.

***Phonemic Awareness.*** Phonemics awareness (PA) is the ability to recognize and play with the sounds of language. It is a necessary precursor to reading and a strong predictor of reading success (Cunningham, 2011). PA includes the ability to rhyme and to manipulate the sounds in words, for example, substituting the /m/ in map with the /k/ sound to make the word cap. While Morris and colleagues (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003) concluded that direct instruction in PA is important, they also concluded that it should be accompanied by instruction and practice in writing skills, the alphabetic principal, and phonics. Just a few

minutes a day of word play is often sufficient to build the phonemic awareness of students that need the extra instruction. Many students come to the kindergarten classroom with sufficient PA skills and are ready for basic instruction in phonics.

The classroom that is explicitly teaching phonemic awareness will be a classroom where many word games are played. There will be rhyming games, letter substitution activities, and simple word building activities (make the word ‘hat’ – now replace the /h/ sound with a /m/ sound; what word did you make?). The teacher will be repeatedly calling attention to the sounds of letters in words, to the distinction of syllables in words, and to the distinction of words from sentences. Also, these classes will have a wide variety of print in the room that students can ‘read’ especially environmental print, to encourage the transition from pure phonological awareness to phonics skills. (Lane & Pullen, 2003).

***Phonics.*** Phonics refers to the teaching of the sounds of language in relation to the symbols of language. For example, the student is taught that the sound /m/ is represented by the letter *m*, while the sound /z/ is represented by either the letter *z* or the letter *s*. This letter/sound connection is important for students to master, as they will need the skill to learn to read unfamiliar words. There are too many words in the English language for each word to be learned separately as a distinct unit; hence the need for phonics instruction. There are two major approaches to teaching phonics: analytic phonics or synthetic phonics (Cunningham, 2011). As the names imply, analytic phonics involves analyzing words or taking them apart into their component sounds, while synthetic phonics involves synthesizing, or putting sounds together to make words.

Analytic phonics involves such activities as learning by sight common words such as cat, dog, bug, and bed. These words are then analyzed, or taken apart into their individual, or groups

of, sounds. For example *cat* could be separated into the onset /k/ and the rime /at/ or the three component sounds of /k/ /a/ /t/. Of particular use is the onset-rime division, for once a word had been learned, then by analogy the student can learn to read, in this example, 20 additional words including *flat*, *mat*, *spat*, and *vat*. Additionally, the component sounds that are analyzed can lead to learning other words, especially those that start with the same component sound /k/: *cap*, *cup*, and *cot* among others. In a study by White (2005), phonics skills were taught by analogy, which is an off-shoot of analytic phonics. Analogy-based phonics instruction relies on the onset-rime combinations to teach word families and decoding skills. This large experiment, involving 4 school, 15 teachers, and 280 students, was successful in increasing overall student reading ability, both with words in isolation and in text. Additionally, increases in comprehension were seen, although there was some doubt as to whether that was attributable to the phonics program as all the participating teachers were already teaching reading comprehension with a well-established, research-based program.

Synthetic phonics involves activities such as learning the individual sounds of letters then blending them into real words. For example, instead of learning the word ‘cat’ students would learn the letter/sound associations of c-/k/, a-/a/, and t-/t/ and then learn to blend them into one word. Once the ability to blend is established, other sounds could be substituted for example, replace the /k/ sound with the /m/ sound to make a new word; students would be asked to blend and read the new word. Middle and ending sounds are substituted in the same manner. A common activity related to synthetic phonics is making words (Cunningham, 2011). Students are given a set number of letters, for example, a, e, u, c, k, p, s. They are then directed to put certain letters together and blend the sounds to make real words: u-p to make *up*, c-u-p to make *cup*, and p-a-c-k to make *pack*. The culmination of this activity would be finding and making the



mystery word which uses all the letters (*cupcakes*). This is a useful activity in building student phonics knowledge and vocabulary, and is generally very engaging for the students. Although there are those who prefer one approach over the other, I have found no research that indicates that one method, analytic or synthetic, is better than another, as long as systematic instruction in phonics skills is occurring.

The classroom that is explicitly teaching phonics will not necessarily be a classroom with many phonics worksheets. Instead, word building activities (synthetic phonics) will be occurring as students learn not only letter sounds, but combinations and manipulation of the sounds and the letters they are associated with. There may also be word sorting activities (analytic phonics) taking place as part of phonics instruction. There would be interactive word walls – as opposed to static, never changing and never referred to word walls which are all too common in classrooms. There will also be evidence of children’s writing as they work on phonics skills in authentic activities (Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham & Allington, 2007).

**Fluency.** Fluency refers to the ability of a student to read quickly, with understanding and – when reading orally – with expression. A lack of fluency is seen in the word by word reading that is common in primary grades. A lack of fluency can also be seen by the reading of the student who reads so quickly that he/she skips over words and does not pay any attention to what he/she is reading. Fluency is often called the bridge between phonics and comprehension (Raskinski, 2003; Schwanenflugel, et al., 2006). This is because students must be able to read fluently enough to attend to the meaning of what is being read in order to comprehend it. If too much of the brain’s resources are expended on sounding out words or even recalling words that are slightly known, there is that much less of the brain’s resources to draw upon in order to understand the reading. Schwanenflugel and colleagues (2006) in a study involving 229 first,

second, and third graders, noted the importance of fluency instruction being carried out alongside of comprehension instruction and being discontinued when fluent reading is achieved.

This skill will be seen in classrooms through repeated oral reading and modeling by the teacher. Daily, or more frequent, read-alouds are an important part of reading instruction, as is repeated reading by students. Students may read such items as easy readers, vocabulary controlled books, poems, daily messages, and nursery rhymes, among other items. Choral reading and echo reading would also be a part of a classroom that is explicitly teaching fluency. As students read these items repeatedly, they are exposed to various words and phrases that lead to automatic recall. The goal of fluent reading is not just to read faster, but to read, and understand, better. It is important also to note that these classrooms will be marked by an absence of round-robin reading, and the presence of small, guided-reading groups where students learn and practice their oral reading skills in a safe environment. There will likely also be a fair amount of peer reading (either together, or taking turns) and reading to the teacher in a one-on-one setting (Kuhn & Rasinski, 2011; Rasinski, 2003).

***Vocabulary.*** Vocabulary instruction is an important component of overall reading instruction. Studies have shown that students with higher listening vocabularies when entering school have higher rates of success with learning to read. Therefore it is important that explicit vocabulary instruction take place daily so as to build the vocabulary banks of all students. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) place all words into one of three tiers for vocabulary purposes. Tier 1 words are those that students learn naturally throughout their early lives and, as such need no instruction. This category includes such words as shoe, clock, run, and jump. Tier 2 words are words that occur frequently enough in written and oral language that students should know them, but that are not as common as tier 1 words. Included in this category are words such as vibrant,

policy, grumpy, and feast. These words need to have targeted instruction that is repetitive enough to get words into long term memory. Tier 3 words are those words, such as phosphorus, protractor, entomologist, and constitution, which are generally content-area vocabulary and have limited usage outside of the area of study. These words would not be taught as vocabulary words, except in the context of the subject being taught.

Vocabulary instruction is one of those skills marked as much by a lack of what is seen, as by a presence of what is seen. There is no copying of definitions from dictionaries in the best practices of vocabulary teaching except possibly as part of a larger task, for example, completing a graphic organizer. Berne and Blachowicz (2009) found that teachers believe, and practice both incidental and systematic instruction in vocabulary. Incidental instruction is that which occurs in the context of other events; for example, while reading aloud, the teacher will stop briefly and explain what may be an unknown word to help students with their understanding. Systematic instruction, however, is direct and explicit, well thought out and carried out. Students who are learning new vocabulary may be exposed to the words by acting them out, finding synonyms, using them in daily speech, and drawing pictures of them. There may be a vocabulary word wall, or content area word walls with content area vocabulary listed. These vocabulary word walls will be changeable as the focus of the unit being studied changes. Because of the power of images in learning new vocabulary, pictures may be found around the room; also, teachers will likely use the Internet to find pictures of items that are words being learned (e.g., tutu, carousel, and frilled lizard). Another item found in vocabulary rich classrooms will be age/grade appropriate dictionaries and thesauri. Teachers may also be well-known for their dramatic abilities as they teach new verbs by acting them out for students. (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2011; Cunningham and Allington, 2007). In a study by Bauman, Ware, and Edwards (2007), 20 fifth grade students

benefited from vocabulary instruction that included explicit instruction, multiple practice activities, chats involving the targeted words, words walls, and a teaching focus that included context clues, antonyms, and synonyms.

***Comprehension.*** Comprehension is the goal of all other reading skills. But comprehension does not just emerge on its own if other skills are taught. Comprehension strategies and skills must be taught in the same direct, explicit manner that phonics and fluency are taught. Years of study have focused on what good readers do when they read so that teachers can take those strategies, strategies that a very few learn naturally, and teach them explicitly to their students. These strategies include such skills as predicting, summarizing, comparing, and self-monitoring of understanding. The manner in which comprehension instruction takes place is as important as what is taught. Menon and Hiebert (2005) in a study involving 75 first graders, found that guided reading groups, using leveled readers, were more effective for teaching comprehension than whole group reading instruction using basals. Furthermore, they observed that matching students to the appropriate text was more important than whether or not the text was vocabulary controlled. Another study found that this systematic, and on-level instruction is important for all students, but more beneficial, and therefore more necessary, for students who are weak readers (Leppänen, Niemi, Aunda, & Nurmi, 2004). In a study by Brown (2008), which focused on transactional strategies instruction (or teaching students how to choose from a variety of strategies in their comprehension ‘toolbox’) found that these strategies helped students to become more independent readers and thinkers.

Comprehension instruction that is characterized by best practices can involve many different strategies. These classrooms may have pair and share activities, graphic organizers, cooperative learning groups, and much discussion. In fact, much discussion is one characteristic

of best practices comprehension instruction that should be seen across all grade levels. “When students engage in conversations about what they have read, their understanding improves (Cunningham & Allington, 2007, p. 115). The teacher who engages in best practices must be skillful at guiding student conversations by asking open-ended questions such as “what did you think when..?” and “what other books does this story remind you of?” These teachers also are masters at think-alouds, teaching students how a reader thinks while reading so the students can learn not only that reading should involve thinking, but that thinking is critical to comprehension. These teachers will not only be teaching various strategies for comprehension, such as predicting, summarizing, self-monitoring, and visualizing, but they will also be teaching students when to use the various strategies that are taught. These classrooms will likely have posters around the room reminding readers of strategies that have been taught and how to use them. And, of course, these classrooms will have much reading occurring – in whole groups, small groups, pairs, and individually. (Almasi & Hart, 2011; Cunningham & Allington, 2007).

**Writing.** Writing is the one area I have added that was not included in the NRP report. As stated earlier, writing and reading are, and should be, inextricably linked. The reading classroom should be a writing classroom, and the writing classroom should be a reading classroom. The writing classroom presents authentic reasons for writing to the students. These authentic reasons could range from writing a letter to the mayor, presenting a book review to the class, or composing a report on a favorite animal to share with friends. Teachers who engage in best practices understand that writing is a complex activity with many distinct skills that must be addressed and melded together to make a writer. Such skills include basic handwriting ability, “knowing the conventions of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and forms....[and] having a vocabulary that permits effective self-expression and communication” (Bromley, 2011. p. 296).

Teachers address each of these skill areas as needed for individual students, and instruct in areas of weakness for the entire class. That is, if only five or six students need help with handwriting, the best practices teacher only works with those five or six, not the entire class. But if the entire class needs instruction in story grammar, then it is given. Because there is a strong relationship between spelling and writing, this classroom also will emphasize learning to spell a large number of words, and learning to use known words to spell unknown words (e.g. if you can spell *went*, you can spell *spent*). Evidence of student writing in all its stages (collecting ideas, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) will be evident. Each student will likely have his/her own writer's notebook and there will be a daily time devoted to writing (whether or not it is called Writer's Workshop). Writing, and evidence of writing, will be everywhere (Bromley, 2011; Cunningham & Allington, 2007).

### **Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhouse study**

A study conducted by Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhouse (2010), focused on effective teachers of literacy with students in high-poverty schools. High-poverty schools were defined as those where more than 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and included schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas. One hundred twenty three teachers in high-poverty schools were selected for this study based on one of three criteria: the researcher's personal knowledge of the teacher; the teachers' participation in a graduate program at the university of one of the researchers; or the teachers were recommended by a school administrator. The identified teachers came from five different states: Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Of the 123 identified teachers, 49 participated in the survey. The link to the online survey was distributed by email to all 123 possible respondents. The majority of the respondents were African American females, with one Caucasian female responding and one

African American male responding. This study will, from here on, be referred to as the Briggs' study/survey.

The nine-item Briggs' survey consisted of all but one open-ended question, yielding "rich and in-depth qualitative data" (2010, p. 155). The Briggs' survey was hosted on a web-based platform, *Survey Monkey*, and a link to the survey was sent by email to all 123 possible respondents. Follow-up emails were also sent in an effort to boost response rates. The Briggs' survey was open for two months, giving ample time for respondents to reply. The link to the survey was not encrypted or protected in any manner, other than being restricted by IP address. That is, a respondent could respond twice if desired, but would have to do so from two separate computers.

The theoretical framework for the Briggs' study was a combination of sociocultural theory and social justice theory. This perspective closely mirrors that of culturally relevant theory if one considers 'high-poverty' to be a culture in itself, as many do (e.g. Beegle, D. M., 2007; Payne, 1996; Tileston & Darling, 2008). The results of the Briggs' survey revealed a wide variety of instructional approaches, methods, and materials were used, but that the majority of these were reflective of best practices as identified by Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni in their 2007 list of best practices; that list is identical to the 2010 list identified earlier (Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010). This is not a surprising result in that the teachers selected or nominated were so chosen because they were believed to be effective teachers of literacy. What was not shown by the Briggs' study was whether or not typical teachers engage in behaviors and utilize materials that would be reflective of best practices.

Data from the Briggs' survey were analyzed using an open coding process and were categorized in three main areas: instruction, assessment, and motivation. Each of these areas was

then analyzed to determine what methods and materials were most useful in these areas. For example, in the instructional area, guided reading, shared writing, modeling, explicit instruction, and cooperative learning were all strategies that were listed by teachers. Each method used was coded so that the variety and intensity of instruction could easily be seen in the data. Data analysis resulted in a narrative summary of what effective teachers of high-poverty students do to teach literacy skills. Table 1 in the Briggs' study (2010) showed ten broad categories of instructional reading strategies, methods, and materials report by the teachers, which included formats for reading, methods, prior knowledge, texts, formats for writing, vocabulary instruction, comprehension instruction, graphic organizers, discussion, and phonics/sight-word instruction. Similar analysis was completed for the categories of assessment and motivation.

There were several limitations noted for the Briggs' study. Among these were the limited number of respondents, the fact that the information was self-reported as opposed to being observed, and the limiting effect of providing definitions for instructional approaches in one of the survey questions. There were also several implications noted for the same study. Among these was the fact that all but one of Morrow and Gambrell's (2011) list of ten best practices were cited by these effective teachers of literacy. Furthermore, it was stated that teachers need the freedom to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students, and that "teachers, not programs, make the difference (p. 163)."

## **Summary**

This literature review first exposed the reader to the major ideas of culturally relevant teaching – academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political awareness – along with its key characteristics: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and liberating. A brief view of what this practice might look like in the classroom was also



presented. Second, the topic of the National Reading Panel and Reading First was discussed, including a discussion of the mixed results of the Reading First program. The NRP and its application in Reading First resulted in increased time spent on reading instruction, but at the cost of content area learning. Also seen was that of the five components of reading that were the focus of the NRP and Reading First – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – vocabulary and comprehension have received far less attention than the other three, again hampering the ability of students in higher grades to read and learn. Third, the best practices movement was discussed. These best practices in a literacy classroom include having exemplary classroom management, establishing a positive classroom environment, holding high expectations for all students, providing scaffolded support as students need it, engaging in authentic reading and writing tasks, reading high quality literature in the classroom, practicing differentiation, using formative assessments, and teaching with explicit instruction. In this discussion of best practices, the components of explicit instruction were presented: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. Finally, a discussion of one specific study focusing on exemplary literacy teachers of students in high poverty schools was discussed. The Briggs’ study was a study conducted with an online survey using the same platform, *Survey Monkey*, as the present study did. This similarity, along with the success of the study, led the researcher to conclude that adapting the Briggs’ survey to the present study would be advantageous. The adaptations and changes made are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

The many aspects of teaching with best practices in the primary literacy classroom, while incorporating the principals of culturally responsive teaching, presented herein provides the novice and experienced teacher with a challenge of mastering time management, possessing a sufficient knowledge base, and maintaining the commitment to do their best for their students.

All teachers face challenging times these days, and the commitment to best practices and culturally relevant teaching can increase that challenge. Whether typical teachers are up to the challenge, and evidence it in their classrooms was examined through the research discussed below in the methodology and results chapters.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Literacy education in the last decade has been dominated by the results of the National Reading Panel (2000), Reading First (NCLB, 2001) and the best practices movement (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). The result has been the creation of an environment in which primary reading education is subject to federal, state, and district mandates. These mandates may or may not be helpful in teaching literacy skills to minority students. In the current educational milieu, with an ever-increasing population of minority students being taught by a stabilized force of primarily White, female teachers, the question of how best to teach minority students becomes more important. Many researchers state that culturally relevant teaching is a prerequisite to effective teaching for minority students, and that this perspective should be evident in all classrooms (Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992). However, the perspective and approaches of CRT are not well-aligned with the perspective and approaches of the best practices movement. So the question becomes, can teachers effectively teach literacy skills to minority students by using the mandates based on the best practices movement?

The intention of this study was to answer that question. Specifically, the researcher was interested in knowing if teachers who are dedicated to teaching minority students by utilizing principles of the best practices (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) movement are also able to incorporate the philosophy of culturally relevant teaching (Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992) in teaching literacy skills to minority students, or if best practices,

whether mandated or not, are a hindrance to teaching literacy skills in a CRT classroom to minority students.

The research question for this study was: *What literacy strategies, methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance?* There are two sub-questions that needed to be addressed to determine the answer to this question: (1) *Do teachers understand the idea of culturally relevant teaching?* and (2) *Do teachers adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement?*

The remainder of this chapter is divided into nine sections. First, the research design is discussed. Next, follows a discussion of research participants, including survey respondents and focus group interviewees. The third section discusses the research procedures used. The fourth section discusses the techniques used for data collection. The rationale for choosing to use survey data and focus group interviews is discussed in this section as well. The fifth section is a brief discussion of the data analysis done, followed by research limitation and delimitations. The next section is a discussion of the research integrity, and finally the chapter closes with a summary.

## **Research Design**

This was a qualitative study combining survey information with information gleaned from two focus group interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003) (as cited by Marshall and Rossman, 2006) list five characteristics of qualitative research: (1) it takes place in natural, not contrived, settings; (2) it uses multiple methods that are interactive; (3) it focuses on context; (4) it is emergent and evolving; and (5) it is fundamentally interpretive. This research does not meet all those criteria, primarily because it did not take place in a natural setting, but instead was

contrived in that the survey used called on teachers to step out of their normal daily duties and give thought to answer open-ended questions. Likewise, the focus group interviews took place in a planned, or contrived, space, not the ordinary space of a classroom setting. However, despite not possessing all the qualities of qualitative research, it does meet several of these criteria. The methods used were interactive, requiring creative input from the respondents and participants. The questions, both in the survey and the focus group setting, attempted to provide the context of a primary classroom focusing on the teaching of literacy skills. The data were not predetermined, but evolved with the reading and rereading of responses. Finally, the data had to be interpreted, not simply reported, to make sense of the data for the reader. Furthermore, the research methods used, focus group interviews and open-ended questions in a survey format, are qualitative methods that resulted in considerable amounts of data that were read, reread, and interpreted.

This was a qualitative study that used a case study design. Case study is built on data collected and analyzed regarding a particular person or group of people, which often includes the words of the participants themselves. The conclusions drawn are relevant to that group, and the discovery of generalizable truths is generally not the goal of case study. The conclusions drawn from this type of research are based on the participants' views and worldview (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Stake (2000) identified three basic types of case studies: (1) an intrinsic case study, which is unusual in some manner, inviting further study; (2) an instrumental case study, which illuminates a particular issue; and (3) a collective case study, wherein several related cases are studied to present a holistic picture of a particular topic. The intrinsic case study might yield a better understanding of a particular case, such as how one third grade teacher integrates reading and language arts skills into the content areas. The instrumental case study refers to a study that is undertaken to provide more insight into a particular situation, or even making or modifying a

generalization. Again citing the hypothetical third grade teacher, the study might be broadened to understand how these teaching strategies interact with the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2012). Finally, the collective case study would look not just at one third grade teacher, but a group of third grade teachers to determine how their approaches to teaching reading and language arts have changed since the implementation of CCSS.

Along the same lines as Stake, cited above, Merriam (1998) also designates three types of case studies: (1) the particularistic case study; (2) the descriptive case study; and (3) the heuristic case study. The particularistic case study, as the name implies, focuses on one particular case: an event or person being studied. The descriptive case study provides a thick description of a particular person or situation. A thick description is one that “goes beyond the mere reporting...[and instead] describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations, and circumstances of action” (Glesne, 2006, p. 27). The heuristic case study is dedicated to informing the audience of readers of the facts and meanings emanating from a case. Because this study focused on discovering what primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and whether these actions reflect culturally relevant pedagogy, this study has been reported as an instrumental study, while endeavoring to provide thick descriptions of teachers’ practices in the tradition of a descriptive case study.

### **Research Participants**

The participants for this study were self-selected from a pool of primary teachers in one southeastern Georgia school district. The cooperating district contains 25 elementary schools and 7 K-8 schools. These 32 schools were solicited for participation, as described in the research procedures. From this possible pool of 32 schools, 11 principals agreed to let their staff respond to the survey and/or volunteer for the focus groups. The demographics of those responding

teachers are detailed below. In addition to the survey respondents, the focus group participants are introduced.

**Survey response rate.** Of the approximately 250 teachers who could respond to the survey, 49 did, which is a response rate of 20%, and lower than the hoped for 30%. This percentage response, however, is within the range of acceptable rates for surveys, which typically range from 10% - 40% response rates. It is interesting that the rate of return was not higher, since Williams and Protheroe (2008) hypothesized that electronic surveys held the promise of higher response rates due the ease of taking the survey. It could be that the open-ended nature of the survey which extended the length required to take the survey may have reduced the response rate.

**Demographics of survey respondents.** The demographics of the respondents were not surprising. Recalling that the teaching population is overwhelmingly female and White, the respondents to the survey were the same. Of the respondents 78% identified themselves as white or Caucasian, with 13% identifying as African American, 4% as Hispanic, 4% as multiracial, and 6% refusing to answer the question. According to the state report card on schools for the 2010-2011 school year (the most recent available), the cooperating district has a demographic breakdown that is not quite as white as the respondents to the survey: one-third of the district K-12 teachers are African American, and just over 60% are Caucasian (Georgia DOE, 2011). This seems to indicate that the results of this survey might not be representative of the entire district. One respondent was male, one refused to answer the question, and the remaining 97% were female. Regarding the education level of the respondents, 31% had a bachelor's degree, 48% had a master's degree, 19% percent had a specialist degree, and 1 respondent (2%) had a doctorate. Again, one respondent refused to answer the question. This statistic more closely

reflected the actual degree level represented on the state's report card: 37% held a bachelor's degree, 40% had a master's, 12% had a specialist degree, and 2% had a doctorate. This sample, then, was representative with regard to education levels of the responding teachers.

The demographics of the schools and classrooms represented were likewise in line with what would be expected, given the trends discussed earlier. Of the two student demographic questions (*what is the racial makeup of your current class?* And *what is the racial makeup of your current school?*), there was again one respondent who refused to answer both questions. The majority of the schools represented (52%) had more than 75% of their school population listed as minority. The school populations are represented in Table 1 below:

Table 1  
*The Racial Composition of the Schools Represented in the Survey*

School Population	Percentage
Less than 10% minority	0.0%
10% - 25% minority	6.3%
25% - 50% minority	20.8%
50% - 75% minority	20.8%
75% - 90% minority	31.3%
More than 90% minority	20.8%

The classroom populations also had more than half reporting that 75% or more of their students were minority. Table 2 shows the makeup of the reporting classes:

Table 2  
*The Racial Composition of the Classes Represented in the Survey*

School Population	Percentage
Less than 10% minority	4.2%
10% - 25% minority	8.3%
25% - 50% minority	22.9%
50% - 75% minority	8.3%
75% - 90% minority	22.9%
More than 90% minority	33.3%

**Focus group participants.** The focus group interviews consisted of two groups of three people each. The six participating educators were all Caucasian women, teaching in the



following grades and with the specified experience: Linda (all names are pseudonyms), a kindergarten teacher with 18 years experience; Donna, a kindergarten teacher with 27 years experience; Jessica, a second/third grade Montessori teacher with 28 years experience; Abby, a third grade teacher with 6 years experience; Brenda, a third grade teacher with 11 years experience; and Tina, a third grade teacher with five years experience. The varied experience of the participants yielded a range of responses. Because all participants were Caucasian women, they do not represent the demographics of the participating district, in which 60% of K-12 teachers are Caucasian (Georgia DOE, 2011).

### **Research Procedure**

This research project used two data collection methods: an online survey consisting of seven open-ended questions plus demographic questions, and two focus group interviews with a total of six educators. Prior to the administration of the study survey, a pilot survey was conducted to determine if the questions were clearly understandable, and if they would elicit the depth of data sought. The pilot survey included all the practice, knowledge and beliefs questions used in the study survey, but no demographic information questions. The pilot survey was distributed by email with a link to the survey, just as the study survey was. Fifteen teachers, all personally known to the researcher, were asked to participate in the pilot survey, and eight responded by answering the survey questions. The respondents included one kindergarten teacher, two first grade teachers, two second grade teachers, and three third grade teachers. Responses to the questions provided quality data in that most of the questions were answered with more than a one or two word answer. The intent of open-ended questions is to elicit quality information, and these questions did that. The differences between the pilot survey and the study survey were that (1) there was a question on the pilot survey asking if the questions were clear;

(2) another question on the pilot survey asked for suggestions to improve the survey; and (3) no demographic information was requested. Demographic information was not collected because that data was not needed to analyze the results of the pilot survey. As for changes that could be made, one respondent suggested that the questions were very similar, and that some of them could be combined. The remaining respondents had no suggestions for changes to be made. Consequently, the questions were reviewed and remained as originally designed. See Appendix A for the final version of the survey.

The survey consisted of 17 questions, nine of which were demographic information, one that asked for participation in the focus group interviews and the remaining seven were the open-ended questions that were the focus of the study. This study was created on and distributed with the online survey program *Survey Monkey*. To initiate the study survey, an email was sent to all 32 principals in the pool of possible participating schools, explaining the survey format, timeline, and purpose as well as assuring principals that district approval for this research project had been received. Principals were asked to forward the email to their K-3 staff with the subject line of ‘K-3 teachers only – survey request,’ consequently ensuring that teachers knew the survey was being conducted in their school with the principal’s approval. The forwarded email contained a link to the online survey, which was hosted on the *Survey Monkey* platform and was user-friendly and easy to navigate. Thus, kindergarten through third grade teachers whose principals had agreed to participate received an email with a link to the online survey that could be completed at their convenience. The initial email was sent three weeks into the school year, after the shuffling of teachers and students that typically occurs with the ten-day student enrollment count. This timing was chosen to increase the likelihood that the principals would not overlook the email in the flurry of emails at the beginning of the year, but would still give the researcher

plenty of time to complete the survey and interviews by the deadline imposed by the district. Principals were asked to forward the link to their K-3 staff and copy the researcher on the email so that she knew which schools were participating. Principals that did not respond positively to the first email requesting assistance with this research project were sent a second, and then a third, email requesting their help.

Of the 32 schools in the district that could have participated, 11 chose to do so. Once principals informed the researcher that their school would be participating, two follow-up emails reminding teachers of the survey and the opportunity to take part in this research study were sent to the K-3 teachers at that school. Resource teachers who do not have a homeroom class, such as art, music, PE, Early Intervention Program, or Title I teachers were not invited to participate in the survey. There was a deadline established for completion of the survey, which was four weeks from the date of the initial email. Teachers were informed that the survey would take approximately 15 minutes to complete; that time was based on the amount of time that participants in the pilot survey said that the survey had taken them.

One question in the survey asked for volunteers to participate in a follow-up focus group interview. Respondents were asked to include an email address for contact information in the comments section if they agreed to the request for focus group participation. Eight teachers responded that they would participate and included their contact information. After a series of emails to set up the focus groups, two teachers dropped out, and subsequently two groups were scheduled for the convenience of participants. Each group consisted of three educators. Each group was asked the same questions, although the conversation in each group varied in its range.

Focus group interviews were scheduled for two times, to accommodate the needs of the participants. Two groups resulted in more data as each interviewee had more time for discussing

her (all were women) views. The interviews were scheduled for afterschool hours. The researcher recorded the interviews and later transcribed them. The digital recordings were erased after the interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions are stored by the researcher in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office to protect anonymity and will be destroyed once the seven-year time limit on the research is completed.

### **Data Sources and Collection Procedures**

Qualitative research relies on data collection methods such as observation, interviewing, review of documents and other artifacts, focus group interviews, and questionnaires or surveys (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Other methods of data collection may also be used. The two methods of data collection used in this research were a web-based survey and focus group interviews. The researcher was interested in determining what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills, and if those practices reflected either the beliefs of the National Reading Panel and best practices movement (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011), and/or the beliefs of culturally relevant teaching (Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992). Subsequently, the practices and understandings of a large number of primary teachers were sought. It was therefore determined that the most efficient way of getting a large number of responses to questions designed to address those issues was through the open-ended questions of a survey. An electronic survey was chosen in the hopes that the ease of completion would raise the percentage responses (Williams & Protheroe, 2008). An attempt was made to limit the number of questions in order to keep the length of the survey down. However, this left a gap in the data that the researcher hoped to fill by getting more in-depth information from focus group interviews. Again, with the desire to get responses from as many primary teachers as

possible, the focus group interview method was chosen over the one-on-one interview in order to get multiple viewpoints.

**Web-based survey.** The first method used for data collection was a web-based survey that was adapted from a research survey conducted by Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhousie (2010) (see Appendix A for the adapted survey). Surveys rely on the honest self-reporting of the respondents, and this limits the usefulness of surveys for some situations. However, there are still many situations in which survey data is useful. Most surveys employ a structured response system that lends itself to statistical analysis, although some surveys include open-ended questions, while a small number of surveys consist almost entirely of open-ended questions. Surveys are useful for “making inferences about a large group of people based on data drawn from a relatively small number of individuals in that group” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 125). Surveys can be conducted through a variety of means, including mail, telephone, personal interview, and electronic platforms. Some of the strengths of surveys include ease and convenience of administration, relative accuracy of results, and the ability to generalize the data to a larger population. Some of the weaknesses of surveys include their relative expense, the importance of getting a representative sample, and the relative lack of depth the survey results may yield.

The survey designed for this research project asked seven open-ended questions and nine demographic questions. The demographic questions did not require personally identifying information, but only general information to use in analyzing the data. The survey was conducted via a web-based program, *Survey Monkey*, because of the ease of completion and hopes for a higher rate of return (Williams & Protheroe, 2008). A web-based survey on the *Survey Monkey* platform had successfully been used to conduct literacy research (Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-

Dalhouse, 2010). That research focused on exemplary teachers of low-income students. The survey created for the 2010 study by Briggs and associates was adapted for this study.

Permission to modify and use this survey was not sought because it was used merely as a guide and significant modifications were made. It was considered that this falls under the fair use clause of the copyright law. The Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhouse survey was discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

**Focus group interviews.** Focus groups interviews were the second method of data collection used in this study. Focus group interviewing has been used for decades in marketing research, and more recently in health professions and the social sciences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It is useful for getting a wide range of views, provided participants are forthcoming in the discussion. Focus groups are conducted in a social atmosphere, which is a more natural setting for discussion than the more formal space of an individual interview. There is great flexibility in pursuing topics that arise which may add both depth and breadth to the data being gathered. Focus groups are also useful because the cost is relatively low, they provide quick data, and the results have high face validity. That is, “because the method is readily understood the findings appear believable” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 114). Focus groups are small groups, typically ranging from four to ten people, who are interviewed as a group (Morgan, 1997). The interviewer asks detailed questions to elicit group discussion that can reveal more insights into the group of people being interviewed, for example, primary teachers, than a single interview might. This is because a single interviewee might not think of ideas that would be ‘jogged’ in his/her thoughts by the comments of another person as is the hope with focus group interviews. People are social creatures who often rely on the social construct to engage in and expand their thoughts, and the focus group format builds on that reality. Morgan cites as a “hallmark of focus

groups” their “explicit use of interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 2).

Morgan (1997) lists three ways in which focus groups are used in educational research: (1) as a self-contained source of data collection; (2) as a supplementary sources of data collection; and (3) as part of research utilizing multi-method approach to data collection. In the first instance, focus groups provide all the data the researcher analyzes for his/her study. In the second instance, as a supplementary source of data, focus groups can be used either before or after other sources, but mainly contribute to the primary source. For example, focus groups can be used before a survey is given to elicit information that would be used in creating survey questions. Or conversely focus groups could be used after a survey to clarify and seek more data on particular issues that the survey brought to light. In the third method of using focus groups, as part of a multi-method approach to data gathering, focus groups are used on an equal value basis with other data collections methods. Multi-method data collection was the approach used with focus groups in this study.

One of the advantages of the focus group interview is the ability to gather in-depth data in a short amount of time by interviewing more than one person at one time. Also, the social format of the interview is conducive to building a relaxed atmosphere in the interview and allowing great flexibility in pursuing topics as they arise in the discussion. Disadvantages include the possibility of an overbearing person in the group aggressively dominating the conversation. A skilled moderator is needed to neutralize this potential situation, and steer the conversation. The researcher’s opinion is that the participants all spoke freely and shared their opinions openly; there were no problems with any participant dominating the conversation. Also, the possibility of unproductive and irrelevant discussions can detract from the focus group interview and need to

be avoided as well (Morgan, 1997). Again, the researcher's opinion is that these types of discussions were avoided. The questions asked of the focus group interviewees are included in Appendix B. Focus group interviews are often recorded and later transcribed, although the transcribing is more problematic than with individual interviews, as there are several speakers to track and in group conversations often one speaker will overlap another, making transcription tricky.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to determine what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and if these practices reflect best practices in literacy (Pressley, et. al., 2001), the study utilized conventional qualitative data analysis procedures. Specifically, a thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985) informed by principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was applied to analyze the data collected from the survey and focus group interviews. A detailed discussion of the data analysis procedures are further provided in Chapter Four.

### **Research Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, the response rate, both for schools and for individual teachers within the schools, was lower than preferred. If this study was replicated, higher rates of return may be obtained by attempting to shorten the survey by including multiple choice questions instead of open-ended questions. This however, would result in a different quality of data. The timing of the study, done at the very beginning of a new school year, may have been a factor as well. Teachers were still getting acclimated to their new classes and may have felt they didn't have the time to spend on a survey. A survey done later in the year may result in a better response rate. Also, the response rate for the focus group interviews was dismal,



and might have been bolstered by asking for volunteers to participate in a group interview that did not participate in the survey.

Second, the racial make-up of the respondents does not reflect the racial make-up of the teaching staff in the cooperating district, thus making it difficult to generalize the data to the entire district. As indicated earlier, there are many more minority teachers, percentage-wise, in the cooperating district than responded to the survey. A higher percentage of minority teachers might have resulted in different responses to many questions, or the answers may have been substantially the same; there is no way to know.

Third, the question on teaching approaches did not result in the philosophical responses the researcher hoped for, but instead resulted in another listing of what teachers do. This question, were the study to be duplicated, should be reworded. Perhaps the original definitions provided by the Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhouse (2010) study should be used and the question should not be an open-ended question. Instead, the question might be a multiple-choice question with space for comments or other responses.

Fourth, this study did not attempt to determine if students taught using the strategies, methods, and materials mentioned were more, less, or as successful as their peers. Therefore, it is impossible to determine if the responding teachers are more successful in teaching literacy skills to minority students than the non-responding teachers. Because of this limitation, the teachers in this study are all assumed to be typical, or average, teachers, not having any particular strengths or weaknesses in regards to teaching literacy skills. A duplication of this study could include a method for comparing average teachers from exceptional teachers, perhaps by relying on administrator recommendations or personal knowledge, as the Briggs, Perkins, and Walker-Dalhouse (2010) study did.

Last, because the response rate for the focus group interviews was so low, it is unknown if these participants were representative of the district teachers, other than to say that they were not racially representative. This limitation casts some doubt on the usefulness of the interviewees' responses. The original plan for this portion of the research project was to draw from teacher responses to the surveys in selecting teachers that seemed to have a good grasp on teaching literacy skills. Since there were not enough volunteers for the interviews for this to occur, the researcher was forced to simply interview the limited number of respondents she got.

### **Research Delimitations**

This research took place in one southeastern Georgia school district. The cooperating district had a student population of almost 34,000 during 2010-2011 (the most recent data available). Of these students, 58% were African American, 27% were white, and the remaining 15% were other minorities (Georgia DOE, 2011). This demographic break-down of students means that the district is a majority minority district. There were 2710 teachers in the cooperating district, of which approximately 750 were K-3 teachers, eligible to participate in this research. However, due to principal choice, only 250 of those teachers could actually participate.

### **Research Integrity**

Trustworthiness of a research study is built on the researcher's adherence to specific protocols for building trustworthiness. Marshall and Rossman (2006) maintain that standards of trustworthiness can be stated as questions that the researcher answers of him/herself and his/her work. These answers give the researcher confidence that he/she is working in a conscientious manner and producing work that is trustworthy. The questions that Marshall and Rossman propose are based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who helped to shape the discourse of trust in qualitative research. The questions they pose are: (1) "How credible are the particular

findings of the study?” (2) “How transferable and applicable are these findings to another setting or group of people?” (3) “How can we be reasonably sure that the finding would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context?” And (4) “How can we be sure that the findings reflect the participants and the inquiry itself rather than a fabrication from the researcher’s biases or prejudices?” (p. 201).

The answers to these questions will be explored here. (1) “How credible are the particular findings of the study?” This point of trustworthiness is bolstered by the inclusion of experts in the field in comparing the researcher’s findings with the understandings of the field at large. These comparisons are clearly seen in the discussion of themes in the results section below. (2) “How transferable and applicable are these findings to another setting or group of people?” The transferability of these finding was not foremost in the researcher’s mind, yet as the themes discussed below show these findings hold universal truths that are supported by other research. The applicability of these findings to another group of people, bolstered as they are by other research, would most likely find a welcome application in several other similar settings. (3) “How can we be reasonably sure that the finding would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context?” The researcher used member checking (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998) for the transcripts of the focus group interviews to validate that the views presented are an accurate reflection of the interviewees’ opinions. Member checking could not be used for an anonymous survey, but the similarity of many answers in the survey and the verification of those answers by other research indicate that these responses were accurately portrayed. The use of an electronic survey instrument eliminated the possibility of surveyor error in recording responses. Finally, (4) “How can we be sure that the findings reflect the participants and the inquiry itself rather than a fabrication from the

researcher's biases or prejudices?" The researcher had a fellow doctoral student review the findings and themes, as well as the codes created to check for bias. An additional check against bias is the findings that surprised the researcher, thus assuring her that she was not reading into the raw data the findings she expected. The surprising results, detailed in chapters four and five, include the mixed knowledge base for culturally responsive pedagogy, and the lack of emphasis placed on teaching comprehension and using formative assessments to guide instruction.

## **Summary**

*What literacy strategies, methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance?* That is the question this research hoped to answer. To gather the data needed to propose an answer to that question, two methods of data collection were used: a Web-based electronic survey and focus group interviewing. The survey was designed after one that has previously been used (Briggs, Perkins, Walker-Dalhouse, 2010), also in a Web-based electronic format, with literacy research regarding exemplary teachers of high-poverty students. The survey was conducted over a four-week period, through email contact with principals and teachers. The focus group interviews were conducted six weeks after the survey was finished, and after initial review of the data.

This research focused on teaching practices for typical literacy teachers of minority student. There were 49 respondents to the survey this study used, the majority of who were White and female, just as the majority of the teaching population at large is White and female. However, there were a smaller percentage of minority teachers responding to the survey than the percentages in the cooperating district. This may limit the transferability of this data to the district population at large. There were several limitations to this research noted, including the disproportionate percentages of respondents just discussed, the smaller than hoped for response

rate, and the limited number of participants in the focus groups. The data which resulted from these two collection methods were rich and are discussed in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and if these practices reflect best practices (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) in literacy. A further purpose of this study was to investigate if primary teachers implement culturally relevant teaching practices (Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992) in their classroom instruction. The theoretical foundation for this study was culturally relevant teaching which is identified as the practice of teaching minority students in such a way that capitalizes on their strengths instead of playing to their weaknesses (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992). Such an approach emphasizes, among other things, high expectations, cultural relevance, and empowering students. This approach to education is necessitated by the demographic shift occurring in public education today wherein the teaching force is remaining relatively White and female, while the student population is becoming ever more diverse.

This research study was built on data gathered from three sources in one southeastern Georgia district: an electronic survey consisting of open-ended questions available to all primary teachers in the responding schools and two focus group interviews, each consisting of three primary teachers who volunteered to participate through one of the questions on the survey. These data sources were complementary and resulted in much information that was analyzed, coded, categorized and finally resulted in the themes discussed below.

## **Data Analysis**

For purposes of this study, a thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985) informed by principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) were applied to analyze the data collected from the survey and focus group interviews. Data analysis is the process of systematically reading and searching the collected data, in this case the survey files and the focus group transcripts, to discover emerging themes. The process of data analysis is not a linear process, but instead follows a spiral, circular, and often circuitous path. That is, data is read and reread, coded and recoded, and side trails are followed looking for emerging codes and categories. It is a complicated, often messy, and sometimes confusing process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Using survey responses and transcripts from focus group interviews, the process of analyzing the data began with a three-level process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns, categories, and themes of the data (Creswell, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). This process required the researcher to read the data repeatedly, inductively coding the focus group transcripts and survey results. Pertinent words, phrases, and sentences were written and coded in the margins. After the completion of this initial step of open coding, axial coding was conducted (Creswell, 2008), to focus more on the significant words and phrases, reading line by line to see what themes emerged. In this study specifically, axial coding involved generating categories and searching for possible relations among the categories and across the data sources. It was a process that required the researcher to refine and rename the codes as new data was integrated. As patterns emerged during this phase, the researcher scrutinized the data more closely through selective coding to determine what typical primary teachers do to teach literacy skills to minority students, and if these practices reflect best practices in literacy. Also, the data was scrutinized to determine whether or not the practice of culturally relevant teaching was being

implemented by the participants. Throughout the data analysis process, the transcripts and the survey responses were reviewed and theoretical notes were made using a constant comparison method in order to determine what properties were comparatively the same and which properties were different (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

It is important at this point to note that initial coding of the responses to the survey questions and interview transcripts was done without reference to the major categories listed as part of the best practices movement (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011; Pressley, et al., 2001) for this research study. The researcher was interested in letting the data speak for itself, without trying to fit the data into preconceived categories. The initial coding resulted in 19 different codes (see Appendix C). The nineteen codes proved to be too many to easily analyze; therefore, another round of coding was done to combine like categories. Codes were created, blended, or eliminated as the data was read and re-read (Glesne, 2006).

From data analysis, six themes emerged and it was only then that a comparison between the themes arrived at independently and those of the major categories of the best practices movement were examined (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011; Pressley, et. al., 2001). This comparison is discussed within each of the themes below. In addition, some of the best practices were mentioned very little or not at all, giving the researcher some reason for concern about the practices of this group of teachers. Some of these glaring gaps are discussed in Chapter five.

### **Thematic Support**

To understand the literacy strategies, methods, and materials that primary teachers use most frequently with minority students, the participants' understanding of culturally relevant teaching, and if the participants adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011; Pressley, et.al.,



2001), the following six themes emerged from the data: (1) variety in reading instruction; (2) variety of writing assignments; (3) variety in grouping strategies; (4) phonics and sight word instruction; (5) mixed knowledge base for culturally relevant teaching; and (6) teacher freedom. Each of these themes relates in some way to one or more of the research questions for this study. The primary research question is answered in part by each of the first four themes. The first sub-question is answered by the fifth theme, while the second sub-question is answered by the sixth theme. As a result, it is necessary to revisit the three research questions that guided this study.

### **Result: Literacy Strategies, Methods, and Materials**

In response to the first research question, *What literacy strategies, methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance*, data analysis consistently found that four themes emerged to show what teachers actually do in their classrooms to teach literacy skills to minority students. The four themes are: (1) variety in reading instruction; (2) variety of writing assignments; (3) variety in grouping strategies; and (4) phonics and sight word instruction.

As will be discussed, the strategies, methods, and materials used do not, on the whole, reflect cultural relevance. Several specific programs were mentioned including (but not limited to) *Six Traits of Writing*, *Thinking Maps*, *Write From the Beginning*, the *Orton Gilligham* reading program, and *Accelerated Reader*. Modeling as a teaching strategy was mentioned several times as was reading aloud, think-alouds, small groups, differentiated instruction, prior knowledge, phonics instruction, review, and practice. Instructional materials mentioned included big books, leveled readers, trade books, picture books, and the district-supplied reading series. Other materials included center materials (the Florida Center for Reader Research was mentioned several times as a resource), charts, and word walls. Daily writing, daily reading, a

variety of texts available, journaling, instruction in vocabulary, and the conventions of writing were also mentioned several times. It is equally instructive to note what was not mentioned. Multicultural literature was mentioned only a total of nine times in the survey, and once in the interviews. Discussion was mentioned twice in the surveys, and not at all in the interviews. Ways to teach reading comprehension were not mentioned, despite a specific question on that topic for the interview, and how to assess students to determine their instructional level was only mentioned once.

***Variety in reading instruction.*** From data analysis, a wide variety of reading materials was mentioned frequently in both the survey and the focus group interviews. Reading materials were said to be used for both independent reading selections and teaching purposes. In the question about motivation, a variety of reading materials being used and available was mentioned 14 times. Included in these comments were trade books, non-fiction books, multicultural books, and readers' theater. Overall the survey comments included more than 80 responses that referred to having a variety of reading texts available for students and used by teachers. Other texts that were mentioned in the survey were big books, e-books, Reading A-Z books, leveled books, library books, and the district selected reading series. This finding is supported by Guthrie (2011) who found that a variety of books is important to maintaining interest and motivation to read in students.

In addition to the number of references to a variety of reading texts, strategies for teaching reading, including reading aloud, modeling think-alouds, choral reading, and use of leveled texts in small group instruction were mentioned. In the focus group questions about teaching specific reading skills, various strategies were also mentioned, including teaching phonics skills, building background knowledge, working on building fluency, and providing

daily reading opportunities. Skill areas that were not referenced often, despite specific questions regarding these topics were vocabulary and comprehension. These two skill areas are crucial to building strong reading skills. Blachowicz and Fisher (2011) state that students need a “flood of words” (p. 226) to build their vocabulary knowledge and that such a knowledge base is important for comprehending text. Likewise, Almasi and Hart (2011), along with Harvey and Goudvis (2007) emphasize the importance of teaching reading comprehension skills, not just assuming reading comprehension follows naturally from decoding and fluency. More details about these apparent gaps in reading instruction are discussed in Chapter Five.

This variety of both reading texts and strategies for teaching reading aligns well with some of the best practices discussed earlier. Both “having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day, including self-selected, independent reading,” and “providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres,” are best practices that are reflected in this theme. One respondent stated that: “We make connections with the texts, and ... model strategies such as using context clues, predicting, inferring, and comparing and contrasting. Most importantly, we read and write everyday!”

***Variety of writing assignments.*** As indicated by the respondent quoted above, the importance of having a variety of writing assignments as both an instructional and motivational tool in the teaching of writing was also mentioned several times. However, from analysis of survey data and focus group interviews, this topic was not mentioned nearly as often as the variety of reading texts and strategies. To be specific, only 23 times did participants cite the importance of having a variety of writing assignments, showing perhaps that less value is placed on the teaching of writing. Although another explanation for this lack of comparable variety is teachers’ lack of expertise in teaching writing. This possibility is supported by the findings of

Gilbert and Graham (2010) and Soiferman, Boyd, and Straw (2010). Brenda and Abby, two third grade teachers who were interviewed for the focus groups stated that teaching writing was difficult because they were never taught the writing process as children, and were never taught how to teach the writing process as teachers.

However some of the interviewees shared useful insights about writing instruction. Jessica, a second/third grade Montessori teacher, shared an informed plan for teaching writing, starting with free write journals, and then using those as jumping off points for teaching the basics of the writing process including revision and editing (Bromley, 2011). She also stated that she taught a lot about how to write paragraphs and the importance of using colorful language, including plenty of adjectives. Tina, a third grade teacher, responded quite positively also, explaining the use of art as a springboard for teaching writing in which students are engaged. The art component helps to feed the imagination and results in more creative and longer writing, but she did not share much about the basics of the writing process. Brenda and Abby, the third grade teachers mentioned above, stated writing is often short-changed in the classroom. As Abby stated, “I’ll tell you honestly writing is one of those things I have a hard time getting to.” This is a disheartening response from third grade teachers who know their students have to take the third grade writing assessment.

On a more positive note regarding teaching writing, Donna, a kindergarten teacher, stated that in her class they do group writing almost every day, producing charts that students can then re-read to build fluency and feed excitement for reading (Cunningham & Allington, 2007). Several survey respondents mentioned the importance of journaling, or other writing, taking place daily, while others mentioned that teaching the writing process is essential. One of the survey respondents, again, speaking of writing, stated that “finding the time to workshop with

students one on one to discuss, edit, and revise their writing” was critical to the success of her writing instruction. Another stated that, “students need to be taught that writing is a process and can be tackled if the steps are followed. Each step needs to be taught and modeled and then practiced by the students.”

Again, as above, in comparing these responses to the best practices discussed earlier, we find that “having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day...” is a close parallel to this theme of variety in writing assignments. It seems obvious from both survey and interview results that reading and writing instruction are valued by the teachers who responded or were interviewed for this project.

***Variety of grouping strategies.*** A third theme that emerged was using a variety of grouping strategies in teaching reading and writing. From data analysis, survey results showed that whole group instruction, small group instruction, and individual conferencing with students were all mentioned. These terms were mentioned 56 times across all questions on the survey, indicating a strong belief in the importance of variety in grouping. Small group instruction is critical to students getting appropriate instruction on their own reading level (Reutzel, 2011), and this strategy was often mentioned in conjunction with the use of leveled texts. In fact this one strategy, small groups and leveled readers account for 40 of the 56 occurrences of grouping strategies mentioned. One respondent stated that her approach to reading and writing instruction was, “small group instruction with an emphasis on leveled reading groups.” This strategy is also included in one of the best practices: “differentiating instruction through the use of whole group teaching, small group instruction, and individualized attention” (p. 45).

Grouping strategies were not limited to the teacher directed times, but also involved peer support in such strategies as buddy reading and peer mentors. One respondent stated that she

“pair[s] struggling/reluctant students with a buddy (buddy reader/peer editor) to boost confidence and provide clarity when needed.” The theme of various grouping strategies was echoed in the focus group discussion about small groups. This discussion focused on the importance, and difficulty, of doing small groups in reading instruction. Abby stated, “I think you get a lot more done in small groups cause then you can really focus on the ones you need to focus on.” Brenda concurred stating that, “I think small groups are better for those struggling.” Two specific difficulties with small groups were also discussed, managing the entire class while in small group including dealing with interrupters (Diller, 2003; Reutzel, 2011), and deciding how to group students (Afflerback, et al. 2011). In conjunction with the discussion of how to group students, teachers mentioned assessment; otherwise, data analysis showed that assessment was mentioned only one other time. Despite the difficulties mentioned, all teachers agreed doing small groups was important for appropriate reading instruction.

***Phonics and sight word instruction.*** For primary teachers it is not unusual that phonics and sight word instruction would receive a prominent place in the statements made in regards to teaching practices. According to the data analysis of survey results, some form of phonics or sight word instruction, including specific programs, was mentioned 44 times across all questions. One respondent stated that she “explicitly teach[es] students the sound/spelling to help them decode and encode fluently.” Specific phonics programs were also mentioned, including *Orton-Gilligham*, *Zoo Phonics*, and *SRA Reading Mastery*; the Florida Center for Reading Research was mentioned six times as a resource for teaching phonics and using literacy centers. This emphasis on phonics instruction is in line with multiple studies indicating the need for early and explicit instruction in phonics (Beverly, Giles, & Buck, 2009; Juel, & Minden-Cupp, 2000; McCandliss, Beck, Sandak, & Perfetti, 2003; NRP, 2000). The emphasis on phonics is part of the

one element of best practices mentioned: “explicitly teaching reading skills including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing.” Although this theme does not encompass all aspects of that particular statement of best practices, it does cover part.

There were two questions in the focus groups that referred directly to teaching phonics and phonemic awareness; there were no questions that dealt directly with sight word instruction. Question three of the focus group survey was “*What do you do in your classroom to teach phonemic awareness?*” Question four was “*What do you do in your classroom to teach phonics?*” The interview responses were interesting because they showed that there was a lack of understanding about the difference between phonics and phonemic awareness, with only one of the six teachers knowing the difference. While this could be explained, for the higher grade teachers as an indication that they do not know what phonemic awareness is because they do not teach it, it was disheartening to see a kindergarten teacher (Linda) confused about the two. Abby and Brenda both agreed that the third graders they teach still need, in many cases, phonics instruction but they are not getting it for the most part. Only one teacher, Donna, responded with a knowledgeable grasp of the two skills and how to teach them – including teaching letter sounds, naming the letters, using charts that students can write on and read, and using emergent readers that she either creates or buys online.

### **Result: Mixed Knowledge Base for Culturally Relevant Teaching**

The first research sub-question asked: *Do teachers understand the idea of culturally relevant teaching?* The researcher was interested in finding the answer to this question to see if the strategies, methods, and materials mentioned in the first four themes were infused with culturally relevant teaching. That is, were those practices, which aligned well with the best practices, used in conjunction with CRT? Since CRT is crucial for the success of minority

students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992; 2011) is it being practiced along with best practices, or has the emphasis on best practices virtually eliminated CRT from the classroom? The analysis of the data consistently showed the results were mixed.

Both the survey and focus groups had the same specific question regarding knowledge of culturally relevant teaching: *What is your understanding of culturally relevant teaching?* These questions were designed to explore the respondents understanding of what it takes to effectively teach minority students. Before exploring this theme further, it might be useful to review the definition of culturally relevant teaching adapted to this paper: *culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes, make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for minority students, and that teaches to the highest standards.* This definition is a combination of the themes of culturally relevant teaching proposed by Ladson-Billings (1992) and Gay (2000). There are in this definition some key ideas to look for in determining the level of understanding of respondents: empowering students, using cultural referents, making learning encounters relevant and effective, and teaching to the highest standards.

It is important to know at the outset that, according to the data analysis of the survey questions, 14 of the 49 respondents did not answer this question, while an additional 6 indicated a lack of knowledge with comments such as 'I received training in CRT,' 'I don't honestly have a clear understanding,' and 'limited.' This means that either 41% of those who took the survey didn't know about this topic or didn't care enough about the question or survey to share about this topic. In addition to the non-responses, there were several comments that reflected a lack of understanding of this topic: "I have received training in teaching culturally...disadvantaged



students through my years.” “Black History.” “I haven’t heard the terms used together as pertaining to teaching.” And “I am currently taking that course at Armstrong.” These are some of the responses that were not added in the 41% of non-responses. This could indicate a real weakness in a majority minority district that might need to be addressed at the district level.

Of those who did respond to the question, a first glance at the responses showed two terms that frequently came up: students (or children) and culture. Twenty-two respondents (45% of survey takers) mentioned students or children in their responses, indicating, at the least, that they understand the need to focus on the students’ needs over the teacher’s comfort level. Only one response seemed to indicate an empowering of students: “encouraging pride in and respecting” the students’ culture. However, making learning encounters relevant to students fared better, with 18 respondents (37%) indicating this was important. A comment in this vein was that “The educator is knowledgeable about what is important to the students she/he teaches. Activities/lessons incorporate cultural (social, economic, racial) aspects that the students can relate to.” Fourteen respondents (29%) mentioned culture in some form in the responses, indicating that there is some understanding that culturally relevant teaching involves an understanding of culture. As the quote above indicates, some respondents recognized that culture includes more than the ‘heroes and holidays’ approaches to multicultural education that can trivialize different cultures while trying to honor them. Unfortunately, there were few respondents who had similar responses indicating an understanding of what culture entails. Of course, this question did not ask ‘what is culture?’ so that may be a weakness of the wording of the question. One cannot be sure that all respondents believe as the above educator does that culture goes beyond the obviously seen aspects of holidays, dress, food, and famous persons, and instead entails an incorporating of the basic beliefs held by mainstream and other cultures,

comparing and analyzing events from differing perspectives, and includes discussions on racism, sexism, and social justice among other items. The use of multicultural books was mentioned six times in this response (and three times in relation to other questions) which seems a low number considering the focus of the survey was teaching literacy skills to minority students, although it could indicate an understanding that there is more to effectively teaching minority students than using multicultural literature.

According to the data analysis of the focus group transcripts, there was an evident confusion about this term and its application to teaching. Tina, Linda, and Abby all responded with comments that indicated an understanding of CRT as incorporating a need to understand the environment from which the students come, whether they are of different races, lower SES status, or some other defining characteristic. Jessica responded with an indication that the culture at large, and its impact on children, was to be considered. Two teachers, Brenda and Donna, had no response other than to say that they both thought they ought to know something about it because they had taken courses on multicultural education. A second question on the same general topic was asked of interviewees: *What do you do to teach literacy skills to minority students? Is what you do for minority students different in any way from what you do/would do for students from a White, middle-class background?* This question was asked to ascertain whether the teachers being interviewed engaged in culturally relevant teaching, even if they could not define the practice. In response to this question, Tina stated that it was necessary to build up a lot of background knowledge in minority students, so that was different, while Abby said that she's not sure, because she doesn't look at her students as being white or minority, but just as students with certain skill levels and needs. Brenda agreed, stating that, "I focus on their skills more than their culture." This notion of colorblindness "treats race as an irrelevant,

invisible, and taboo topic” (Howard, 2006, p. 57). By ignoring the race of their students, Abby and Brenda, and others who espouse the same, are erasing crucial components of their students’ identities. Donna disagreed with Abby and Brenda, stating that things definitely have to be done differently, including building background knowledge and encouraging more frequently and profusely.

Overall, then it appears that the answer to this question is a half-and-half split of yes and no. About half the teachers seemed to understand what culturally relevant teaching is while half do not. If half of the students in a class did not understand a topic after it was taught, then perhaps it would be necessary to revisit the topic for at least that half, if not other whose understanding might be shaky, considering the level of misunderstanding occurring. Given the percentage of teachers not understanding culturally relevant pedagogy, the researcher would consider this an overall weakness of the cooperating district, especially since well over half of the students in the district (73%) (Georgia DOE, 2011) are minority students.

### **Result: Teacher Freedom**

The second research sub-question asked: *Do teachers adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement?* Findings from data analysis showed that teachers have considerable freedom to make choices about teaching strategies, methods, and materials, as long as the Common Core State Standards (2012) are taught as expected. Only 15% of teachers stated that materials are mandated, while 40% stated that while certain things are mandated, there is choice in other things. This implies, then, that teachers have at least partial freedom to choose materials that would meet their students’ needs. This freedom could be an encouraging sign, however, the themes already discussed showed that teachers adhere closely to parts of the best practices movement, and that many of

them do not possess the knowledge base to utilize their freedom to the maximum benefit of their minority students. In addition to the question on mandated materials, the questions on materials used in the classroom and strategies utilized give some insight into this question. There was a wide variety of materials cited as being used across the district, showing again the freedom that teachers possess.

One of the best practices that was mentioned in the survey results (not in these exact words) was “explicitly teaching reading skills” Two others were “providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres,” and “having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day.” Furthermore, in the question about the five most important things you do, some responses reflected the best practice of “differentiating instruction through the use of whole group teaching, small group instruction, and individualized attention.” The responses to the interview questions about what teachers do in their classrooms to teach various literacy skills also provide some insight into this question. However, many of the answers to this question were vague, with phonics and phonemic awareness being confused by many and no clear answers about teaching either of them provided. The question about vocabulary provided some lucid answers and some confusion, while the questions about fluency and comprehension revealed mostly confusion about teaching strategies and assessment tools. Some of the best practices were mentioned very little or not at all in both the survey results and the interviews, including “having excellent classroom management,” “providing scaffolded support for students in all areas of literacy,” and “using a variety of formative assessments to guide instruction.” Overall, then, the researcher concludes that most teachers adhere to the guidelines of the best practices movement, while some do not. Based on the 80% of respondents who answered the question about the five most important things you do

to teach literacy skills, and their comments (see Table 3) it seems fair to state that the majority of teachers adhere to the mandates of the NPR and best practices movement.

Table 3

*Teacher Comments*

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The Five Most Important Things You Do to Teach Literacy Skills

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Ability/small groups  
 Be positive, patient, and encouraging  
 Build vocabulary  
 Daily reading  
 Daily writing  
 Explicitly teach phonics  
 Explicit instruction in sight words  
 Guided reading  
 Keep a structured environment and regular routine  
 Modeling  
 Provide scaffolding  
 Read-alouds  
 Set high expectations  
 Teach the writing process in steps  
 Test to find reading level

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The freedom teachers indicated they have can help them especially in differentiating instruction to meet the varied needs in the classroom (Ankrum & Bean, 2008). Teacher freedom is not one of the nine best practices in literacy instruction, but the idea of best practices implies that in order for excellent literacy teaching to occur, teachers should have the flexibility and freedom they need to make choices that reflect best practices. Although not mentioned directly in the questions from which this theme was drawn, or the responses, it is also a critical component of culturally responsive teaching. The freedom to choose materials and strategies to meet your students' needs is important for all teachers (Pressley, et al, 2001).

**Summary**

This research used an electronic survey and two focus group interviews to collect data regarding typical primary teachers' literacy practices with regard to minority students. Also investigated was teacher knowledge regarding culturally relevant teaching. Data analysis was

conducted using a three level process of open, axial, and selective coding. The initial 19 codes resulting from the first round of coding are listed in Appendix C.

From the electronic survey and the two focus group interviews, the process of data analysis determined six themes. These six themes were discussed in detail above, and where they intersected with the nine best practices of literacy education that was also introduced. These six themes showed us that most teachers in the collaborating district adhere to at least some of the best practices of literacy. Additionally, teachers reported having a great deal of freedom in choosing strategies, methods, and materials for teaching. However, that freedom may not be used frequently to address the needs of minority students, as data also revealed that half the teachers were unfamiliar with the basic tenets of culturally responsive teaching. Findings, implications, and recommendations are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

## **Chapter Five: Findings, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

### **Summary**

Primary education has always placed a strong emphasis on the teaching of early literacy skills. This emphasis in the last decade has been increased as schools, districts, and states adopted policies that reflect the results and beliefs of the National Reading Panel (2000), Reading First (NCLB, 2001) and the best practices movement (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). This has created an environment in which primary reading education is subject to federal, state, and district mandates that may or may not be helpful in teaching literacy skills to minority students. In addition to this increasing emphasis on the NRP and best practices, many researchers have asserted that culturally relevant teaching is a necessity to effectively teach minority students.(Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1992). However, reconciling the NRP results and best practices in literacy with culturally relevant teaching is challenging. So the question becomes, can teachers effectively teach literacy skills to minority students by using the mandates based on the best practices movement?

**Problem statement and purpose.** The intention of this study was to answer that question. Specifically, the researcher was interested in knowing if teachers are able to utilize the results of the best practices movement in teaching literacy skills to minority students in a classroom that is dedicated to culturally relevant teaching or if best practices are a hindrance to teaching literacy skills in a CRT classroom. Therefore, this research study was designed to determine if typical teachers in an urban district in southeastern Georgia teach literacy skills to minority students in a manner consistent with best practices in literacy and/or culturally responsive pedagogy. The research question that guided this study was *What literacy strategies,*

*methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance?* There are two sub-questions that needed to be addressed to determine the answer to this question: (1) *Do teachers understand the idea of culturally relevant teaching?* And (2) *Do teachers adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement?*

The theoretical framework for this study was culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 2011). This is an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view literacy practices of primary teachers because of the increasing diversity of students. The increasing diversity of students is in direct contrast to the stabilized nature of the teaching force, wherein 83% of all teachers (nationwide) are White females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). Culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the need to work within the strengths and cultural background that students bring to the classroom, instead of working from a cultural deprivation standpoint (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2006). The working definition of culturally responsive pedagogy used in this paper is: *culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes, makes learning encounters more relevant to and effective for minority students, and that teaches to the highest standards.* This definition is a blending of the definitions proposed by Ladson-Billings (1992) and Gay (2000). The salient features of culturally relevant teaching are empowering students, using cultural referents, making learning encounters relevant, and teaching to the highest standards. The increasing diversity of students means that culturally relevant teaching is becoming a more important framework to adopt in the classroom. The cooperating district has 73% of its students identified as minority



(Georgia DOE, 2011), increasing the importance of investigating literacy practices in this arena through a culturally relevant lens.

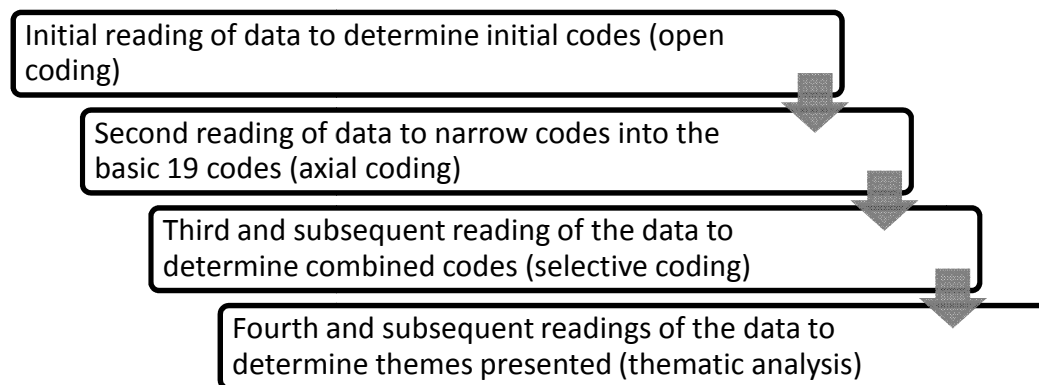
In this chapter, the researcher provides a brief overview of the data collection methods used, followed by a discussion of the findings that emerged from this research including a brief presentation of the themes that were discovered. The researcher then presents other key findings from the data analysis. After this discussion the researcher presents conclusions that can be drawn from this research and these findings, followed by recommendations and then implications. Finally, the researcher closes with concluding remarks.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The research involved an electronic, web-based survey, hosted on the platform *Survey Monkey*, and two focus group interviews. The survey was open for four weeks, and the link to the survey was distributed by email to all eligible schools in the cooperating district. Of the 32 schools that could choose to participate, 11 did so, a 30% school response rate. However, the teacher response rate was only 20%, with 49 of approximately 250 teachers responding to the survey. The survey included a line item asking for participation in the focus group interviews, to which eight teachers responded positively, although only six ended participating in the group interviews.

The results of these data sources were analyzed using principles of grounded theory (Leininger, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Open, axial, and selective coding were utilized to determine prevalent themes in the data. The researcher looked first for relevant codes that could be detected in the survey documents and interview transcripts. After this initial reading of the data, a second reading was done with an emphasis on identifying codes that were similar enough to be combined. This process resulted in 19 codes that were used to further read and analyze the

data (see Appendix C). With these 19 codes in mind, another reading of the data was done, looking for thoughts and ideas that might have been overlooked. The 19 codes that were developed proved to be too many to analyze easily, thus leading the researcher to look for codes could be combined under the same thematic heading. This process is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The result of this process was the six themes that were identified and discussed in chapter four. A summary of each of those resultant themes is presented below.



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*Figure 1.* The coding process: data was read repeatedly, in a spiral manner continually looking for ideas that may have been overlooked or that could shed further light on the themes being developed, especially in the third and fourth steps of the process.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The researcher investigated classroom practices of typical primary (K-3) teachers with regards to best practices in literacy (Allington, 2011; Briggs, Perkins, & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Duke, 2011; Duke & Block, 2012; Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) and culturally relevant teaching (Callins, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 2011). The data analysis revealed six themes that showed that typical primary (K-3) teachers in one southeastern Georgia district adhere closely to some tenets of the best practices movement but that many teachers do not have the knowledge base to enact culturally relevant teaching. The results also showed that teachers have a great deal of freedom in their choice of strategies, methods, and materials for teaching literacy

skills. The six themes were (1) variety in reading instruction; (2) variety of writing assignments; (3) variety in grouping strategies; (4) phonics and sight word instruction; (5) mixed knowledge base for culturally relevant teaching; and (6) teacher freedom. These themes are presented in Table 4 in relation to the research question each theme answered.

Table 4  
*Themes Discovered, Presented by Research Question*

Research Question	Themes
What literacy strategies, methods, and materials do primary teachers use most frequently with minority students and do they reflect cultural relevance?	Variety in reading instruction Variety of writing assignments Variety in grouping strategies Phonics and sight word instruction
Do teachers understand the idea of culturally relevant teaching?	Mixed knowledge base for culturally relevant teaching
Do teachers adhere to the mandates of the district and state that reflect the beliefs of the NRP and the best practices movement?	Teacher freedom

These six themes will be discussed briefly, with special emphasis being placed on the relation between the themes and both best practices in literacy and culturally relevant teaching.

**Variety in reading instruction.** Teachers that responded to the survey or participated in the focus group interviews valued variety in both texts and strategies used for reading instruction. Trade books, multicultural books, non-fiction books, big books, e-books, leveled books, and the district adopted reading series were all mentioned as being part of the variety of reading texts chosen. A variety in reading choices for both instruction and independent reading is important to maintaining motivation and interest in readers (Guthrie, 2011; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). Strategies that were mentioned as being important to primary literacy teachers included think alouds, reading aloud, choral reading, literacy centers, the use of leveled texts, teaching phonics skills, building background knowledge, and providing daily reading opportunities

(Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Ankrum & Bean, 2008; Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Iaquina, 2006; Kimbell-Lopez, 2003). These strategies help teachers to teach the variety of skills needed to develop proficiency in reading.

Variety in reading texts and strategies is a key component of two of the nine best practices mentioned in the literature review: “having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day, including self-selected, independent reading” and “providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres.” This shows that teachers are utilizing at least some of the best literacy practices in their classrooms. However, multicultural books were mentioned only nine times in the survey results and once in the interviews, showing that perhaps the reading instruction that is taking place is not necessarily culturally relevant teaching (Souton-Maning, 2009). While not a magic bullet to ensure that culturally responsive pedagogy is occurring, the use of multicultural literature would likely be an indicator of some sensitivity to minority students’ differing needs. As Gay states, “Literature...is a powerful medium through which students can confront social injustices, visualize racial inequities, find solutions to personal and political problems, and vicariously experience the issues, emotions, thoughts, and lives of people otherwise inaccessible to them.” (2000, p. 131).

**Variety of writing assignments.** In addition to valuing variety in reading instruction, teachers valued variety in writing assignments. The most common writing assignment mentioned was daily journal writing, which many teachers then used as a springboard to teaching writing skills and process. Other writing that was mentioned included charts, summaries of stories, opinions about books read, group writing activities, and using illustration as a jumping off point for writing (Bromley, 2011; Soiferman, Boyd, & Straw, 2010). A few teachers referred at least in

part to teaching the writing process, with editing and revision as key components and less emphasis on publishing. One teacher states: “Teaching the writing process - students need to be taught that writing is a process and can be tackled if the steps are followed. Each step needs to be taught and modeled and then practiced by the students. In the beginning stages of teaching, I don't expect perfect compositions. I want my students comfortable with the steps and comfortable with ‘making their work’ better during the revising/editing steps.” The importance of teaching the writing process is seen in this statement.

Variety in writing, like the variety of reading discussed above, also relates to a best practice: “having students engaged in many authentic reading and writing tasks throughout the day, including self-selected, independent reading.” One comment from a teacher on the survey was to let them write about themselves: “They love to tell about themselves so any type of biography works!” Writing about what the students are interested in, including themselves, is a powerful method for getting disaffected students, including minority students, more engaged in school. Gay (2000) in reviewing curricula that supported culturally relevant teaching specified that personal narratives can be a key element to an effective and culturally responsive writing curriculum.

**Variety of grouping strategies.** In addition to variety in reading and writing, variety in grouping strategies is a theme that emerged from the data. Small groups, whole group, and individual conferences were all forms of grouping that teachers used to reach the students with the knowledge and skills they needed to gain. Small groups were cited more than any other strategy for grouping, mostly in the context of teaching reading using leveled readers or other targeted texts. This practice aligns directly with the best practice of “differentiating instruction through the use of whole group teaching, small group instruction, and individualized attention.”

Differentiation is crucial to meeting the various needs of students whose spectrum of abilities in one class can cover several grades. As Reutzel (2011, p. 413) states, “the tendency of some schools to create a ‘one size fits all’ curriculum...will not meet the needs of all children.”

Differentiation is necessary. However, differentiation is practically impossible without the use of various grouping strategies that take advantage of each student’s strengths and targets each student’s weaknesses. As one teacher stated “Small groups are essential as is guided reading/leveled reading.” Teachers who participated in this research were well aware of that fact and emphasized the importance of various grouping strategies in teaching literacy skills.

**Phonics and sight word instruction.** A fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis of the survey results and interview transcripts was the importance placed on both phonics and sight word instruction. This is not a surprising result, since the survey targeted kindergarten through third grade teachers. Phonics instruction lays the foundation for mastering the complexities of English as both a reader and a writer. The emphasis on phonics reflects what research has found: early and explicit instruction in phonics is necessary for reading skills to develop appropriately (Beverly, Giles, & Buck, 2009; Juel, & Minden-Cupp, 2000; McCandliss, Beck, Sandak, & Perfetti, 2003; NRP, 2000). The emphasis teachers placed on phonics is in line with one best practice: “explicitly teaching reading skills including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing.” Although not all skills are covered by this theme, one is. Teachers also mentioned sight word instruction several times, often in conjunction with phonics. There was some confusion about the difference between phonics and phonemic awareness in the teachers who were interviewed, but they all agreed that phonics was an important piece of the reading skills puzzle.

**Mixed knowledge base for culturally relevant teaching.** An interesting finding in this research was the theme of a mixed knowledge base for culturally relevant teaching. Considering the fact that the cooperating district is a majority minority district, the researcher was surprised to find that half of the teachers in that district had a limited or non-existent knowledge of culturally relevant teaching. In fact, 41% of the responding teachers either did not answer the question or had answers that indicated a limited knowledge. In addition to non-answers, there were a large number of irrelevant answers such as “I’m taking that course at Armstrong” and “I have received training in teaching culturally disadvantaged students through the years.” These irrelevant answers raise the percentage of non-answers to just over half (53%) of respondents indicating a weak or nonexistent knowledge of CRT. Of those that did include more responsive answers, most indicated a need to consider the background, needs, and experiences of the students being taught. As one teacher said “C.R.T. is making a conscious effort to relate learning to the home/community environment whenever it will help students to better, and more effectively, learn required curriculum.” The importance of teachers making a ‘conscious effort’ to meet students where they are was echoed by other respondents:

“I do not assume all of my students understand what I am asking them to do. I try to see if they have prior knowledge on the topic and take it from there. I am conscious of the different cultures in my class. It is important to involve the families and make them comfortable learning.”

Unfortunately, with half the responding teachers not understanding culturally relevant teaching, it is likely that students are not receiving the best education that they could, had they more knowledgeable teachers. This premise found support in the focus group interviews, where the same question was asked. However, the focus group interviewees also had a question about what

they do to teach minority students. This question was for the purpose of determining if teachers were engaging in culturally relevant teaching even if they could not articulate what it means. The answers, or non-answers, showed again that more than half of the teachers interviewed did not understand CRT. This is a sad state of affairs in a majority minority district that should be addressed at the district level. Ideas for addressing this imbalance of knowledge are found under recommendations.

**Teacher freedom.** The last finding was encouraging in that it showed teachers have a great deal of freedom in selecting the methods, materials, and strategies they use in their classrooms. This freedom is tempered with the need to adhere to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2012), but many teachers mentioned freedom within the CCSS. The freedom teachers have is also tempered by the knowledge that half of them do not have the understanding necessary to use that freedom to the best advantage of their minority students. Teachers overwhelmingly reported some or complete freedom from mandated materials, indicating that there is significant flexibility for teachers to meet the needs of their students. Increasing the percentage of teachers who understand and can implement culturally relevant teaching would make the freedom already present more beneficial to students. This freedom to make choices about materials, methods, and strategies is not a best practice in itself. However, many of the best practices mentioned earlier would not be possible without the significant freedom teachers indicated they have. For example, “Providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres” can only be done if teachers have the freedom to choose the literature they expose their classes to, literature that draws on the cultural backgrounds and evident needs of the class.



## **Additional Significant Findings**

In addition to the major findings of this research discussed in the themes above, there were some glaring absences of knowledge that should be noted. These absences may indicate that the responding teachers are not doing these things in their classroom, or they may indicate an inadequate wording of questions to elicit the necessary information. Whatever the case may be, these absences were significant enough to warrant notice and explanation. The gaps discussed below are (1) a lack of instruction in comprehension strategies; (2); limited instruction in vocabulary and (3) little use of formative assessments. These results showed up in both the lack of emphasis placed on them by the survey respondents and the lack of discussion about these items by the interviewed teachers.

**Lack of instruction in comprehension strategies.** “Comprehension is critical for successful reading” (Almasi & Hart, 2011, p. 251). Although phonics and vocabulary and fluency are all important in reading success, comprehension is the primary goal to which all these individual parts are pointing. Fluency, for example, without comprehension results in word callers that do not understand what they have read (Cartwright, 2010). Cartwright (2010) suggests that 20% - 30% of struggling readers may be word callers who do not know how to focus on comprehension. Early and intense instruction in comprehension, in conjunction with phonics, fluency, and vocabulary, may help to reduce the percentage of older students (4<sup>th</sup> grade and up) who fall into this category. Unfortunately, according to data analysis, that is not occurring in the cooperating district.

In the survey, the term comprehension or reading comprehension was used only four times. One of the four times comprehension was mentioned, it was mentioned as an assessment tool for progress monitoring. One of the survey questions asked about the five most important

things the respondents did to teach literacy skills to minority students. Unfortunately comprehension skills received little attention: the term comprehension was used only once in this question. Ideas that relate to comprehension, but don't use that word, were limited to repeated statements to engage in read-aloud time daily. The one exception to that was modeling which was mentioned fourteen times, but specifics about what was to be modeled were not mentioned often. However, one teacher did state that "We make connections with the texts, and teachers and paras model strategies such as, using context clues, predicting, inferring, and comparing and contrasting." This was a bright spot in a discouraging topic.

One of the focus group questions asked directly "*How do you teach comprehension in your classroom?*" The first response by all those who responded was to say that asking questions was a primary way of teaching comprehension. Asking questions is more of a comprehension assessment – checking to see if students understand what they are reading – than a strategy for teaching comprehension. Actual strategies for teaching comprehension, such as think alouds, guided discussion, use of anchor charts, rereading for deeper meaning, and comparing/contrasting did not come up in any conversation in the interviews beyond "asking questions." Linda, a second/third grade Montessori teacher, responded that she likes using SRA reading labs, where students have to read a short passage, and then answer questions about it. She also stated that, "Reading stories and asking questions, what's going to happen next, or what's happened so far, asking them if they have questions" is effective. Jessica responded that class read-alouds were an effective method. Checking for understanding after reader a simple phonics reader was mentioned as important by both Tina and Linda. The important point about most of these responses is they are assessments of comprehension, not ways of teaching

comprehension, indicating a serious lack for teachers whose primary task is to teach basic reading skills.

**Limited instruction in vocabulary knowledge.** The intentional teaching of vocabulary can help to build comprehension skills. Vocabulary instruction occurs daily in the classroom, often in incidental manner, but it is the deliberate teaching of new words that helps to build students' vocabulary banks that contribute to comprehension. Aspects of this deliberate teaching include building a word-rich environment, provide explicit instruction in key vocabulary, teaching word learning skills, and integrating vocabulary instruction across the curriculum (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2011). These skills are essential for building the word knowledge base necessary for advanced reading. However, these skills do not develop in a vacuum; they must be taught explicitly using strategies such as graphic organizers, wide reading, modeling and think alouds, word play, and clustering. Discussion is also important to building vocabulary skills.

According to data analysis, building vocabulary knowledge fared slightly better than comprehension, with seven mentions in the survey. One teacher stated that "We always preview the vocabulary and discuss prior knowledge" while another stated simply "BUILD VOCABULARY" (her emphasis). However, compared to the 56 times that grouping strategies were mentioned and the 80 times that different types of text were mentioned, the seven times that vocabulary got a nod seem rather weak. Four of the seven times it was mentioned was in response to the question about the five most important things to do as a teacher of literacy skills. The researcher believes that teaching vocabulary is much more important than this and would have been mentioned more often if it were as important to the teachers being surveyed. In the focus group interviews, the question of teaching vocabulary fared slightly better, with some informed responses. Linda, the second/third grade teacher stated she used Latin roots, antonyms,

and synonyms to help teach vocabulary, while Tina, a third grade teacher discussed the importance of teaching students how to use context clues. Using words in context and completing graphic organizers are both strategies that two other third grade teachers used, while Donna, the kindergarten teacher, emphasized using the words being taught in a variety of ways and having multiple, frequently referenced word walls. If the focus group interviews had been a reflection of the responses in the survey, the researcher would feel much better about the teaching of vocabulary in the cooperating district. This was not the case. It seemed as if the focus group teachers had a better understanding of the importance of and methods for teaching vocabulary than the survey respondents. This could, however, be attributed to the wording of the questions, and the fact that the survey and interviews did not use the exact same questions.

**Little use of formative assessment in teaching reading.** Formative assessment can be a critical component in the teaching of literacy skills because it informs the teacher at what level a student is performing and where to start with instruction (Afflerbach, et.al., 2011).

Unfortunately, data analysis showed that assessment was mentioned only once in the survey results and once in the focus group interviews. This lack of emphasis on formative assessment could mean that teachers are just following a curriculum protocol with little reference to student abilities and needs. While the necessity of a curriculum is not disputed, the need to tailor that curriculum to where the student is should not be in dispute either. This state of affairs coincides with what Reutzel (2011) observes: "...in the recent past it has been rare to observe teachers consistently gathering assessment data for the purpose of monitoring students' progress and then actually using these data to inform the selection of instruction approaches, strategies, interventions, or content." While differentiation seems to be occurring, based on the fact that

multiple methods of grouping students are important to teachers, it may be that not enough targeted teaching is occurring, based on the lack of emphasis on formative assessment.

These gaps in the data were obvious enough to warrant a discussion. It is possible that the wording of questions may have resulted in the lack of emphasis placed on comprehension, vocabulary, and formative assessment. However, it must be remembered that for the focus group interviews there were two direct questions about comprehension and vocabulary, giving ample opportunity for those subjects to be addressed. The two questions, “*What do you do to teach comprehension in your classroom?*” and “*What do you do to teach vocabulary in your classroom?*” were obviously asking for strategies used. The question on vocabulary elicited better information from the focus groups than the question on comprehension, perhaps indicating a better grasp of vocabulary teaching strategies by district teachers than comprehension teaching strategies. There was no direct question, either on the survey or in the interviews, which asked about formative assessment, again causing one to wonder if the wording of the questions is to blame for these absences in the data.

## **Conclusions**

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this research study. First, there is a definite lack of understanding about what culturally relevant pedagogy is and how to implement it in the classroom in the district under study. As both Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (2009) state many times, using culturally responsive pedagogy to teaching minority students is much more likely to result in positive outcomes for minority students. Furthermore, because of the significant percentage of teachers in this district that do not understand, and do not use, culturally relevant pedagogy, it is impossible to tell from this study if successfully melding culturally relevant pedagogy and best practices is realistic.

Second, many teachers, although given significant amounts of freedom to choose materials and strategies to teach their students in a culturally responsive fashion, instead tend to stick with the dictates of the best practices movement, as described in chapter two. It is encouraging that a fair amount of freedom is experienced by these primary teachers, but discouraging that they do not know how to use that freedom to the advantage of their minority students in choosing texts and strategies that would reflect culturally relevant teaching. Given the degree of ignorance about culturally responsive teaching shown through the surveys and interviews in this research, it is not surprising that teachers do not use their freedom to teach in a culturally responsive manner. Nonetheless, the fact that the freedom exists holds out hope for a future where more informed teachers will make better choices for their minority students.

Third, formative assessment to determine a student's learning level seems to be undervalued and might need to be re-emphasized as a critical part of the literacy curriculum. Formative assessment, differing as it does from summative and high-stakes assessments, should be an integral part of every literacy teacher's practice, primarily because such assessments have "considerable promise to enhance the teaching and learning of reading." (Afflerbach, et. al., 2011). Unfortunately, the evidence from this study is that formative assessment is seldom considered in teaching literacy skills to primary grade children. This critical component of literacy education was mentioned only once in all the surveys and interviews done.

Fourth, primary teachers value using a variety of literature to teach literacy skills. This result showed up plainly in the surveys and interviews. It correlates to the best practices guideline of "providing students with access and exposure to high-quality literature across a range of genres." Unfortunately, the use of multicultural literature was not emphasized in the surveys or interviews, occurring only nine times in the surveys and once in the interviews. The

use of multicultural literature is not an indication that culturally relevant teaching is occurring, but the more multicultural literature being use, the greater the likelihood that it is (Gay, 2000).

## **Recommendations**

There are several steps this researcher recommends as a result of this research. These suggestions are targeted towards the participating district and schools, but may be reasonable suggestions for similar districts and schools to consider. In considering what recommendations to make, the researcher remained ever aware that the participating district was not adequately represented by the participants in either the survey or the interviews, and thus there may exist pockets in the district, particularly in the non-participating schools, where these recommendations would not be appropriate.

First, the cooperating district should develop a survey focused just on teachers' knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy to determine the needs for further professional development in this area, and what exactly are the weaknesses to be addressed. The weakness of knowledge in this area, considering that the district under study is 73% minority, should be a red flag to all those concerned about minority students in the district achieving at rates comparable to their white peers. As a result of the suggested survey, the participating district should then design and implement a professional development series on culturally responsive teaching and have principals recommend teachers for the course, and/or teachers self-select themselves for the course. This should be a simple task to accomplish if the district partners with one of the two area universities with teacher education programs. That the participating district has these resources to draw on should enable it to meet the need for further education in the area of culturally responsive teaching in a timely and efficient manner.

Second, the participating schools should implement refresher training on the importance of formative assessment and how to administer it and interpret the results. Formative assessment is sadly lacking in this district according to the results of these surveys and interviews. Formative assessment is an important part of teaching literacy, and needs to be re-emphasized as the critical component that it is. As Afflerbach, Kim, Crassas, and Cho state,

The current context of reading assessment is marked by imbalance. A significant portion of this imbalance is attributable to the supreme attention given to high-stakes testing and a resultant lack of focus on *classroom-based reading assessment that might help change the teaching and learning of reading* (2011, p. 320, emphasis added).

As implied by this statement, the lack of attention paid to formative assessment in the literacy classroom is not just a problem in the participating district and schools, but a wide-spread problem. Teachers should be retrained not only in the use of tools of formative assessment, but in the use of teacher observations and the use of anecdotal record keeping as a tool of formative assessment.

Third, the participating schools should hold training sessions on best practices in literacy and how teachers can use their relative freedom in selecting methods and materials to make choices that reflect both best practices and culturally relevant pedagogy. This training would be most beneficial to teachers who engage in the proposed district-wide training on culturally relevant teaching. These teachers then would have the tools necessary to integrate both best practices and culturally relevant teaching, using the best of both to engage and teach both minority and mainstream students in their classrooms. These teachers would likely become better teachers of literacy, and follow-up studies should be done to see if this is true. If the training provided impacted classroom teaching positively, these teachers can then become mentors to



other teachers who need help in integrating two often competing philosophical frameworks into one method of teaching.

Finally, professional development courses should be instituted that target the teaching of comprehension and vocabulary skills. The cooperating district has redesigned its professional learning department and included six literacy coaches in its staff. This staff is ideally placed to handle such a professional development task. To target the neediest teachers, principals might consider doing informal evaluations looking just for strategies being used for these two skill areas. Another possible method of determining who needs such professional development is to administer a required survey using open-ended questions about what strategies are used by each teacher to teach these two skill areas.

### **Implications**

The learning gap between black and white students persists in spite of the use of best practices. This can be seen in the scores for the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). These scores show that in the cooperating district three times as many black students did not meet the minimum standard as white students (10% compared to 3%) (GaDOE, 2011). The same gap exists at the other end of the spectrum, where 21% of black students exceeded on the test, while 57% of white students exceeded. This difference may in part be contributed to the lack of culturally responsive teaching, but there is not enough evidence from this study to support that as a solid conclusion. The fact that the majority of the survey respondents and interviewees used portions of the best practices outlined in this paper, yet the learning gap persists is an indication that best practices alone will not solve the problem of underachieving minority students. Differentiation is needed that emphasizes being responsive to minority students' needs. This differentiation is critical because some students will learn to read in spite of how they are taught,

while others must have the benefit of explicit instruction, usually in a small group setting, to learn to read (Reutzel, 2011).

A differentiation that focuses on being responsive to minority students' needs is crucial because of the differences in the demographics of teachers and students. Nationally, 83% of teacher are white, while students in public schools are increasingly more diverse with only 58% of students identified as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). In the cooperating district, the differences between the teaching staff and students are only available as an aggregate of all K-12 teacher and K-12 students, not by grade. But it is reasonable to suspect that the demographics would be similar if available by grade level. These statistics show a more diversified teaching force, with only 61% of the teachers being white, 32% being black, and the other 7% being other minorities (GaDOE, 2011). These statistics bear out the truth of what Howard (2006) states: we must "prepared a predominantly White teaching force to work effectively with an increasingly diverse student population" (p. 1). As the results on the CRCT test confirm "we have much work to do in creating the kinds of schools that work well for children of color" (Howard, 2006, p. 1).

This necessary differentiation begins with white teachers recognizing and admitting to themselves that they have benefited from being white, while colleagues who are not white, and our non-white students, have had to or will face obstacles the likes of which we cannot, as white educators, understand (Howard, 2006). This inner work is necessary for the outer work of being responsive to the needs of minority students to be effective. Two of the teachers in the focus group interviews claimed a color-blindness towards their students that effectively erased or dismissed a crucial part of their students' identities. This idea of color-blindness is not the way of

the future, but instead we need to acknowledge and work with the many facets of the children we teach (Gay, 2000; Paley, 1979/2000).

A necessary second aspect of differentiation is that which works itself out in the classroom by, among other things, establishing high standards for all, utilizing knowledge of students' backgrounds and understanding, and incorporating multicultural literature that invites discussion of sensitive topics such as class warfare, racial differences, and gender disparity (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 2011). Even in primary grades, students can be taught to be critical readers and thinkers, preparing the way for the intense learning that should take place in higher grades.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Studying culturally responsive pedagogy and best practices together was a challenging task. Whether these competing philosophies can be integrated to improve literacy outcomes for minority students is a legitimate concern, especially considering that the best practices movement is the driving force behind much of literacy instruction today. These two topics were looked at individually in the surveys and interviews conducted and then conclusions were drawn as to the likelihood that such integration is occurring. There was little evidence for such integration, and furthermore, it was disheartening to discover the depth of ignorance regarding culturally responsive pedagogy in a district where almost three-quarters of its students are minorities. This lack of understanding of minority students' unique educational needs may contribute to the persistent black/white achievement gap. Meanwhile, it was encouraging that teachers indicated they have some freedom to choose methods and materials that reflect their students' needs instead of having everything mandated. But, although this is indeed an encouraging fact, it was discouraging to note that there was a lack of understanding, again

particularly of culturally responsive pedagogy, that would enable them to make wise and useful choices. Despite the fact that the majority of teachers who responded to the surveys and interviews indicated a close adherence to the standards of the best practices movement, there were still considerable gaps in this area of knowledge also, particularly with concern to strategies for teaching comprehension and vocabulary, and the use of formative assessments. The end result showed that teachers need more professional development both in culturally responsive pedagogy and in best practices, as well as the integration of these philosophies and practices.

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## Appendix A

### *Web-based Survey*

Directions: Please answer as fully as possible the following questions. “Minority students” refers to any student that is not a middle-class, white (European-American) student.

1. What grade do you teach?    K      1<sup>st</sup>      2<sup>nd</sup>      3<sup>rd</sup>
2. How many years have you been teaching in that grade? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many years total have you been teaching? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How would you categorize the type of classroom in which you are currently teaching?
5. What have you found to be successful in motivating minority students to read and write in your classroom? Describe.
6. The overarching goal for reading and writing instruction is to help children become active, self-regulated, independent readers and writers. Please describe three research-based instructional strategies to teach reading and writing that you have found successful with minority students.
7. How would you describe your approach to reading/writing instruction?
8. What instructional materials are used to teach reading in your classroom to minority students?
9. Are instructional reading/writing materials district mandated, or do you have a choice in what you use? Explain.
10. What are the five most important things you do in teaching reading/writing to minority students?
11. What is your understanding of culturally relevant teaching?
12. What is the racial make-up of your current classroom?
  - a. Less than 10% minority students
  - b. 10% - 25% minority students
  - c. 25% - 50% minority students
  - d. 50% - 75% minority students

- e. 75% - 90% minority students
  - f. More than 90% minority students
13. What is the racial make-up of your current school?
- a. Less than 10% minority students
  - b. 10% - 25% minority students
  - c. 25% - 50% minority students
  - d. 50% - 75% minority students
  - e. 75% - 90% minority students
  - f. More than 90% minority students
14. What is your highest earned degree?
- Bachelor's      Master's      Specialist      Doctorate
15. What is your race? \_\_\_\_\_
16. What is your gender?    Male      Female
17. Would you be willing to take part in a focus group interview after school hours? If yes, please enter your email address in the comment box below.

## **Appendix B**

### *Focus Group Interview Questions*

1. What is your understanding of culturally relevant teaching?
2. What do you do to teach literacy skills to minority students? Is what you do for minority students different in any way from what you do/would do for students from a White, middle-class background?
3. What do you do in your classroom to teach phonemic awareness?
4. What do you do in you classroom to teach phonics?
5. What do you do in your classroom to teach fluency?
6. What do you do in your classroom to teach vocabulary?
7. What do you do in your classroom to teach comprehension?
8. What do you do in your classroom to teach writing?
9. How do you decide whether or not a teaching strategy you are using in your classroom should be kept or replaced with something else/better?
10. Do you read any professional literature, such as journals or magazines about teaching, or books about teaching?
11. Is there anything else about teaching literacy skills to minority students that you would like to add?

## Appendix C

### Initial 19 categories found through coding

- cultural relevance
- graphic organizers
- grouping strategies
- hands-on activities
- home involvement
- modeling
- phonics instruction
- prior knowledge
- sight word instruction
- student interest
- teacher attitude
- teacher choice of materials
- teaching strategies
- technology
- use of rewards
- use of specific programs
- variety of reading texts and strategies
- variety of writing strategies and assignments
- vocabulary instruction.



## **Appendix D**

### **Letter of Informed Consent for Online Survey**

1. My name is Tammie Pittsley. I can be reached by phone at 912-572-9350 or by email at [tjpittsley@gmail.com](mailto:tjpittsley@gmail.com). I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University doing research to complete my dissertation.
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to determine if K-3 teachers are successful in implementing best practices in literacy and culturally relevant teaching.
3. Participation in this research will include completion of an online survey that will take approximately 15 – 20 minutes to complete.
4. Discomforts and Risks: There is a risk that you might feel some embarrassment or other negative emotions as a result of some of the questions asked during the survey. Responses are not required, and you may choose to discontinue your participation in the survey at any time
5. Benefits:
  - a. There are no direct benefits to you, the survey participant.
  - b. The benefits to society include the possibility that administrators, district personnel, and other researchers may be able to select areas for professional development and/or further study.
6. Duration/Time required from the participant: It is anticipated that the maximum time required will be 20 minutes for survey completion.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: The researcher, Tammie Pittsley, will maintain all records in a locked file cabinet in her home office. The data will be stored for 7 years following the conclusion of the study. The researcher will be the only person with access to the data. Electronic files will be printed for hard-copy storage, and then the electronic file destroyed. No other person will have access to these items.
8. Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.
9. Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to participate in the survey and later change your mind, you may choose to stop participating at any time by ending the survey prior to the end. You are not required to

answer any questions during the survey and can choose to answer some, all, or none of the questions.

10. Penalty: There will be no penalty for not participating in this research.

11. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. By filling out the survey, the participant agrees to the informed consent.

You can request a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H12439

**Title of Project:** Are Best Practices in Literacy Best For Minority Students? An Investigation Into What Primary Literacy Teachers Do to Teach Literacy Skills to Minority Students

**Principal Investigator:** Tammie Pittsley; 162 W. Tahoe Drive, Savannah, GA, 31405; 912-572-9350; tjpittsley@gmail.com

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Michael Moore; Georgia Southern University, Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading, PO Box 8144, Statesboro, GA 30460, 912-478-0211; mmoore@georgiasouthern.edu

## Appendix E

### Letter of Informed Consent for Focus Group Interviews

1. My name is Tammie Pittsley. I can be reached by phone at 912-572-9350 or by email at tjppittsley@gmail.com. I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University doing research to complete my dissertation.
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to determine if K-3 teachers are successful in implementing best practices in literacy and culturally relevant teaching.
3. Participation in this research will include completion of a 1 – 1 ½ hour focus group interview with up to 10 participants, all K-3 teachers.
4. Discomforts and Risks: There is a risk that you might feel some embarrassment or other negative emotions as a result of some of the questions asked during the focus group interviews. Responses are not required, and you may chose to discontinue your participation in the group interview at any time
5. Benefits:
  - a. There are no direct benefits to you, the interview participant.
  - b. The benefits to society include the possibility that administrators, district personnel, and other researchers may be able to select areas for professional development and/or further study.
6. Duration/Time required from the participant: It is anticipated that the maximum time required will be one-and-a-half hours of interview time.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: The researcher, Tammie Pittsley, will maintain all records in a locked file cabinet in her home office. The data will be stored for 7 years following the conclusion of the study. The researcher will be the only person with access to the data. Electronic files will be printed for hard-copy storage, and then the electronic file destroyed. No other person will have access to these items. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because I cannot ensure that the other group members will maintain confidentiality.
8. Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.
9. Compensation: Each group interview participant will receive a \$2 Georgia Lottery ticket as a token of appreciation for participation in the interview.

10. Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to participate in the interview group and later change your mind, you may choose to stop participating at any time by telling me, the researcher, or by simply leaving the group or refusing to answer any more questions. You are not required to answer any questions during the interview and can choose to answer some, all, or none of the questions.
11. Penalty: There will be no penalty for not participating in this research. All participants who show up at the interview site will receive the lottery ticket prior to the interview beginning, so that a decision to no longer continue will not affect your receipt of the token.
12. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number **H12439**

**Title of Project:** Are Best Practices in Literacy Best For Minority Students? An Investigation Into What Literacy Teachers Do to Teach Literacy Skills to Minority Students

**Principal Investigator:** Tammie Pittsley; 162 W. Tahoe Drive, Savannah, GA, 31405; 912-572-9350; tjpittsley@gmail.com

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Michael Moore; Georgia Southern University, Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading, PO Box 8144, Statesboro, GA 30460, 912-478-0211; mmoore@georgiasouthern.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F

### Survey Results

What have you found to be successful in motivating minority students to read and write in your classroom?	
Variety of reading texts and strategies	27%
Student interest	14%
Variety of writing strategies and assignments	13%
Use of rewards	13%
Teacher attitude	11%
Use of specific programs (including Accelerated Reader 3%)	7%
Small groups	4%
Hands-on activities	3%
Illustrating and drawing	3%
Other	4%

Please name three research based instructional strategies for teaching reading and writing to minority students.	
use of specific programs (including Accelerated Reader 3%)	31%
teaching strategies	26%
variety of reading texts and strategies	23%
variety of writing strategies and assignments	12%
grouping strategies	5%
technology	1%
graphic organizers	1%

How would you describe your approach to reading/writing instruction?	
Teaching strategies	67%
Teacher attitudes and approaches	31%
Specific programs	6%

<b>What instructional materials are used to teach reading in your classroom to minority students?</b>	
Texts: big books, multicultural books, level books, weekly readers, reading series, trade books, chapter books, e-books	45%
Phonics and sight words instruction	19%
Methods: technology, interactive white boards, FCRR, flash cards, KWL, 5 pillars of reading, AR	18%
Formats for writing: journals, writer's workshop, 6 traits of writing	5%
Formats for reading: read-alouds, listening center, computer based reading	3%
Other: games, videos, music, teacher-made materials, district standards, edhelper.com	10%

<b>What are the five most important things you do in teaching reading/writing to minority students?</b>	
Teacher attitudes and behaviors: praise, organization, patience, consistency	25%
Explicitly teach reading/writing skills: phonics, sight words, vocabulary, capitalization, punctuation	22%
Reading methods: choral reading, read-alouds, variety of reading materials, rereading, checking for comprehension	12%
Grouping strategies: differentiate instruction, small groups, one-on-one, whole group	11%
Student motivation and involvement: peer mentors, variation, accountability, high interest	9%
Modeling: modeling fluency, think alouds, modeling writing	9%
Specific programs: AR, Wordly Wise, Write From the Beginning, Visual Phonics, Orton-Gillingham	6%
Writing Methods: write daily, journals, variety of writing prompts	4%
Scaffolding difficult tasks	2%

<b>Are instructional reading/writing materials district mandated, or do you have a choice in what you use? Explain.</b>	
Teachers have a choice of what materials to use	45%
Some materials are mandated, while in other areas choice is allowed.	40%
Materials are mandated	15%